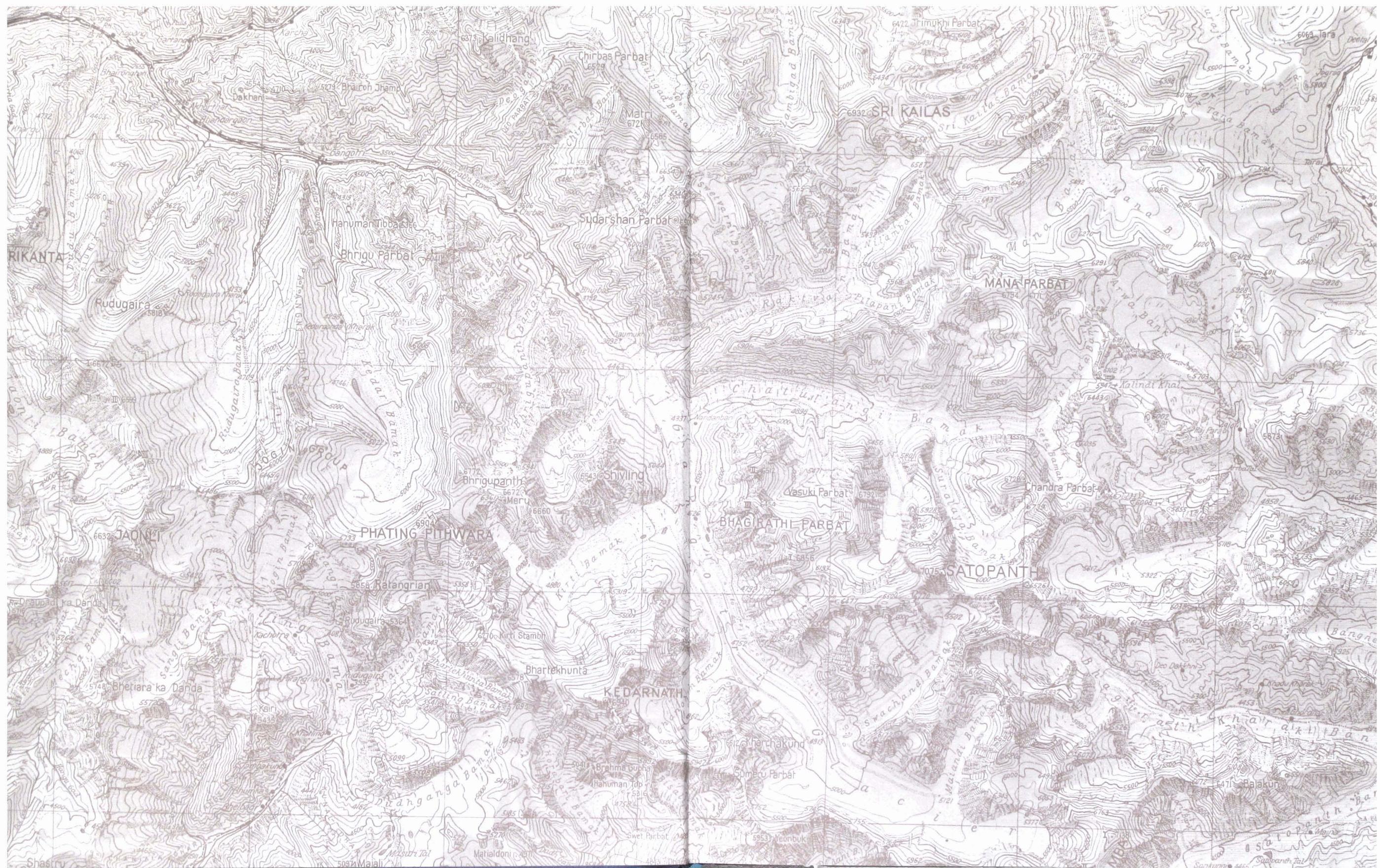


HIMALAYA

Swami Sundaranand



Through the
Lens of a Sadhu

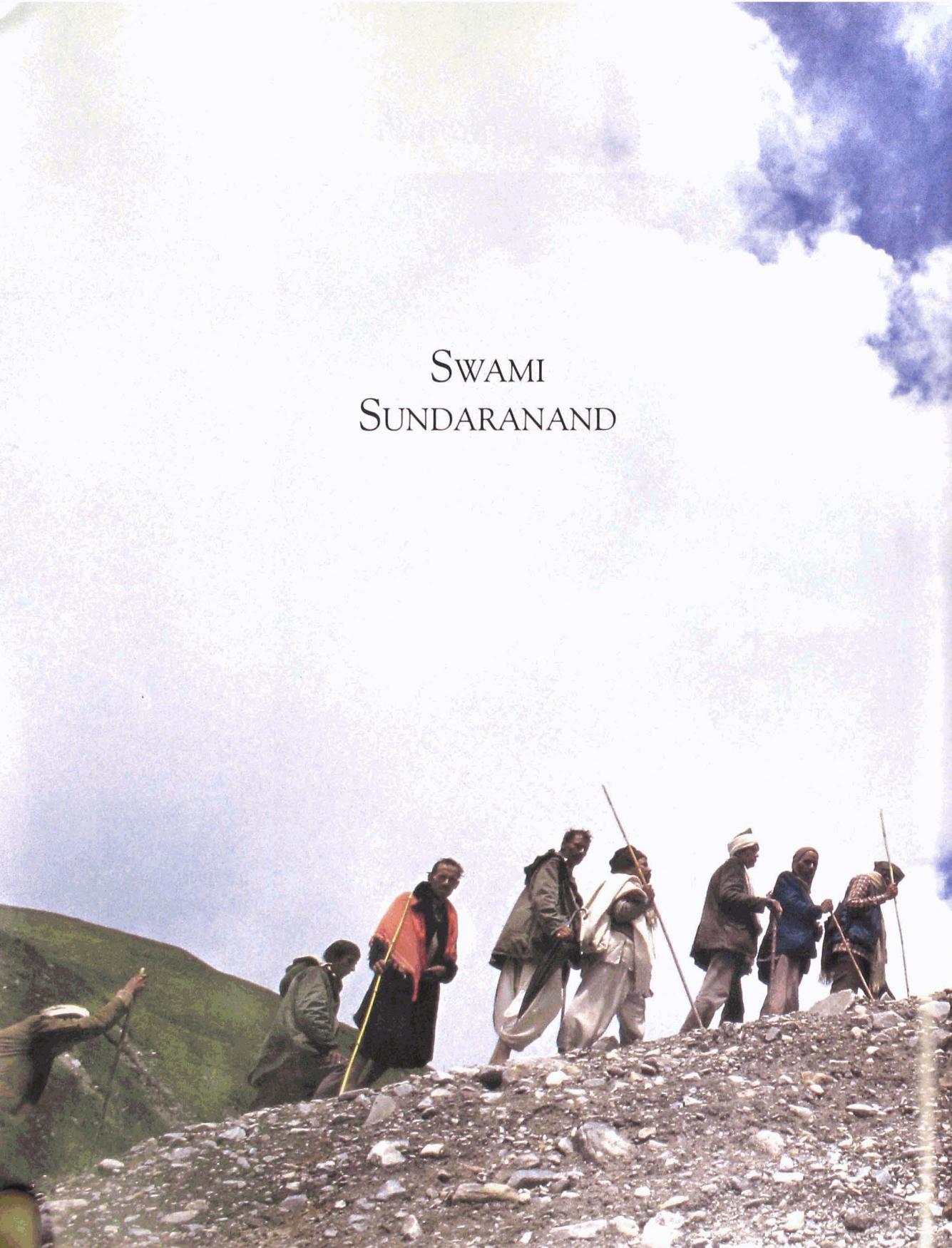


Aum Ganeshaya Namah



Lord Ganesha – the remover of obstacles

Before entering
the portals of
the Himalaya,
I prostrate myself
at the feet of
Lord Ganesha,
the son of
Lord Shiva and
goddess Parvati.



SWAMI
SUNDARANAND

HIMALAYA

*Through the
Lens of a Sadhu*



Himalaya

Through the Lens of a Sadhu

© Swami Sundaranand

August, 2001

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Swami Sundaranand

Design
Systems Vision

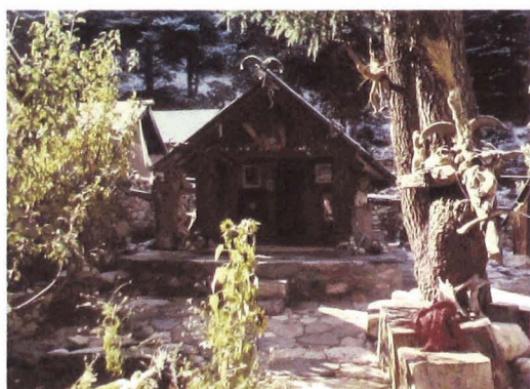
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Printed and bound in Singapore.



*Tapovan Kuti, Gangotri,
where the author has lived since 1948.*

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Nandadevi Raj Jat procession on its way to Hemkund.

ॐ

ओ३म् इति एकमक्षरं परं ब्रह्म
Aum is the name of Omnipresent God

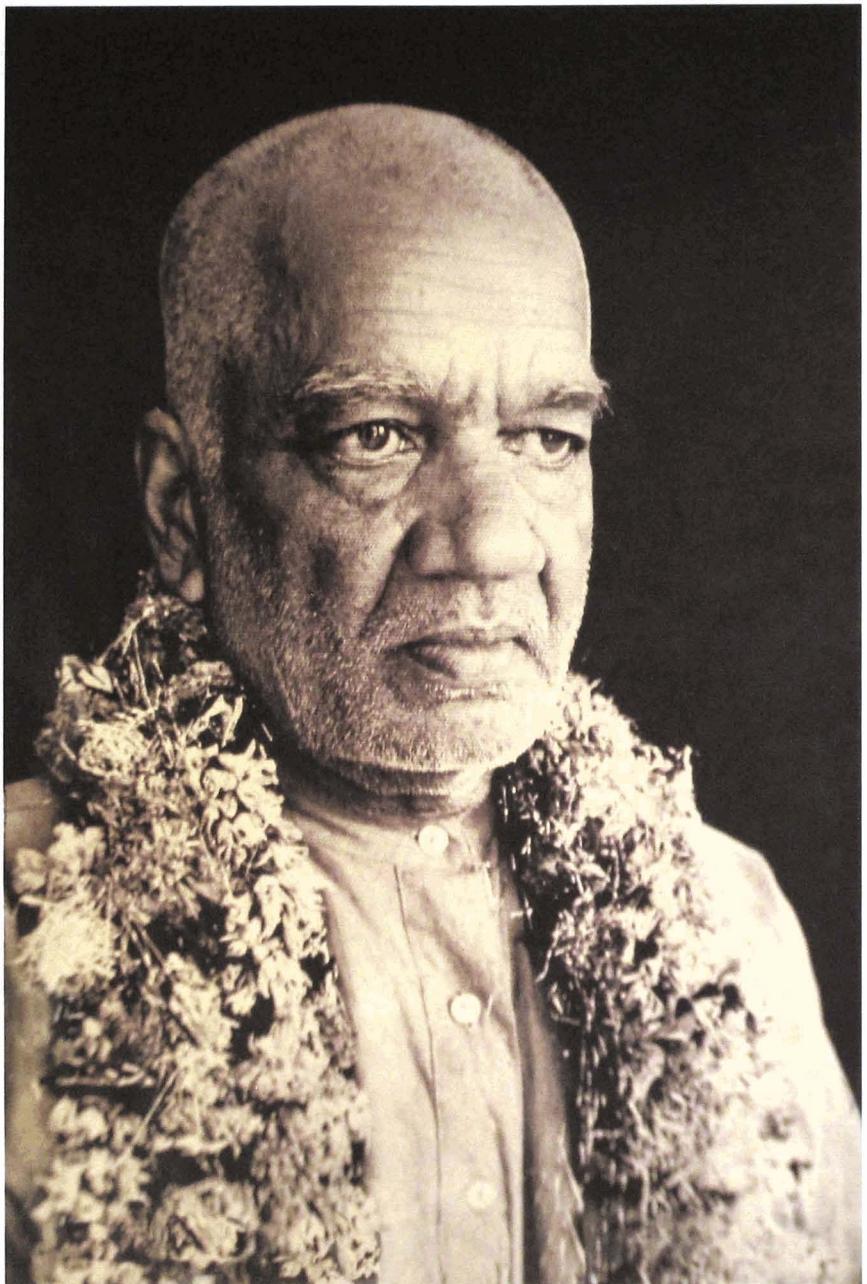


खुले नैन साहब को देखूँ - कबीर

May I see the Lord with open eyes – Kabir

(Full pictures on pages 56, 72, 117, 239)

*This book is dedicated to my revered gurudev
Swami Tapovanam Maharaj (1889-1957)*



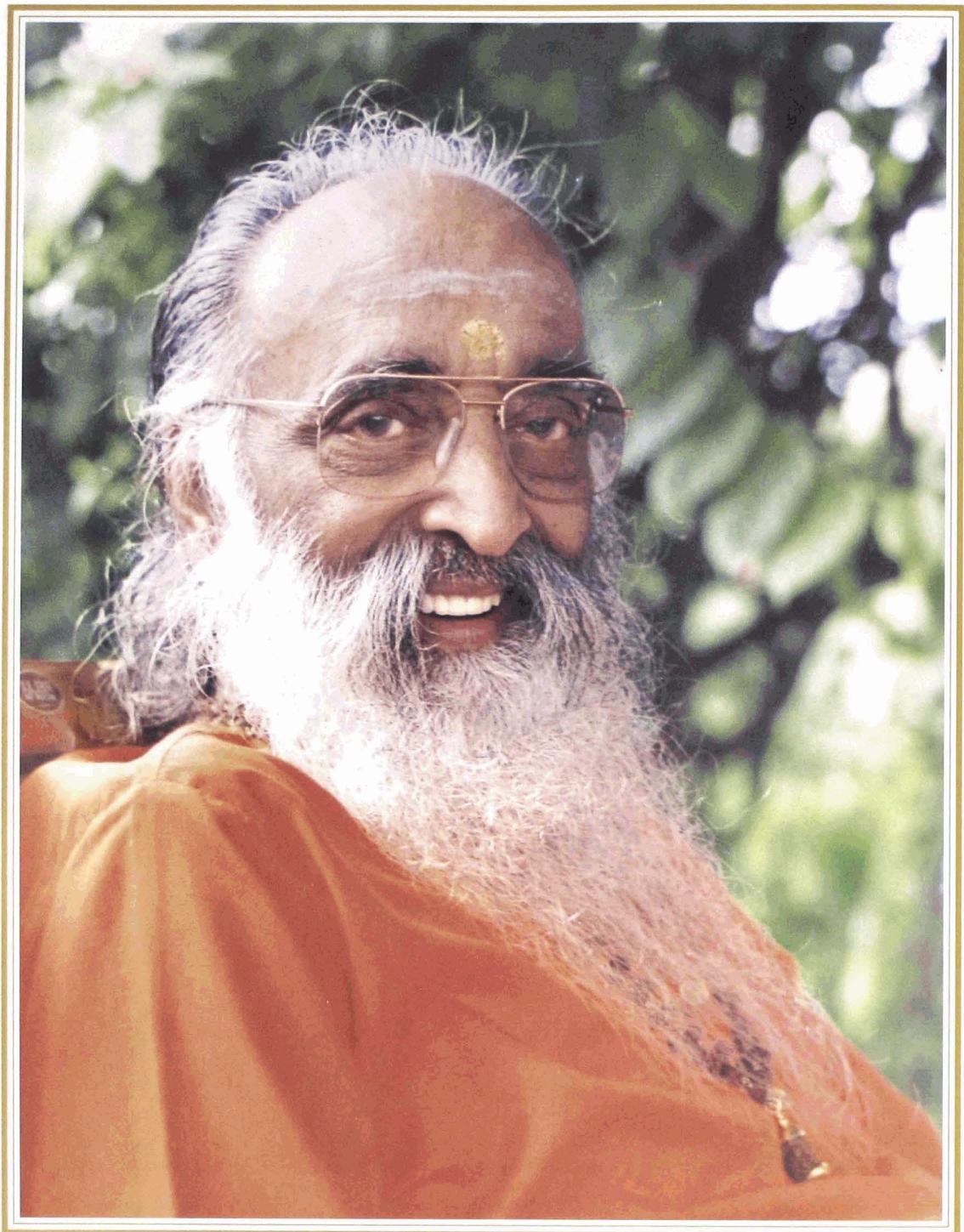
घोरं तपः कलेशतति विषह्य,
चिरं परिश्रम्य निजार्थं सिद्धयै।
जगति कृतार्थो हिमवद् विभूतिः
प्रख्यायते सर्वजनैः महात्मा ॥

This great soul is praised by all on earth. He is not only the treasure of Himalaya but is like Himalaya himself. He succeeded in achieving all his aims by undergoing great austerities, during the course of which he faced innumerable difficulties and great hardships.



Neelkamal – rare Himalayan flowers
which grow at heights between 17,000 to 18,000 ft and bloom in September-October.

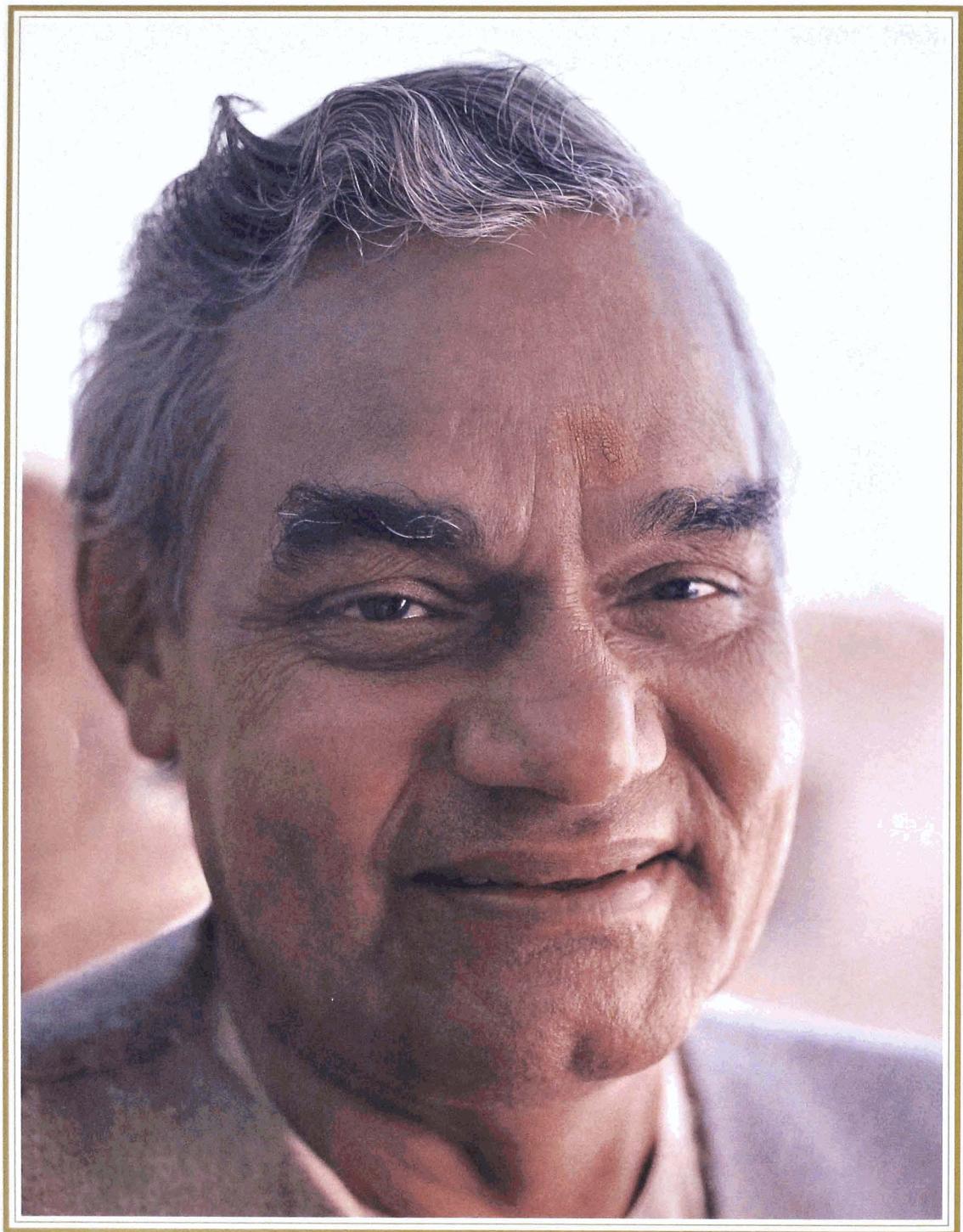
I offer these flowers at the feet of my gurudev.



*Late Swami Chinmayanand, a disciple of gurudev and my gurubhai.
He founded the Chinmaya Mission in 1951.*



Swami Tejomayanand, currently President of the Chinmaya Mission.
He succeeded Swami Chinmayanand.



A study of Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee when he came to Uttarkashi (1983).

Message



प्रधान मंत्री
Prime Minister

संदेश

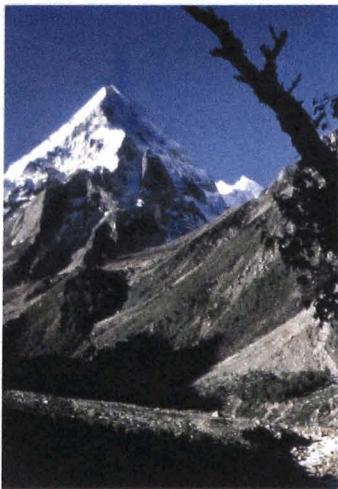
मुझे यह जानकर प्रसन्नता हुई कि स्वामी सुंदरानंद जी अपने 60 वर्षों के अथक परिश्रम के उपरांत 'हिमगिरि दर्शन' पुस्तक प्रकाशित कर रहे हैं।

प्राचीन काल से ही भारत ऋषियों और मुनियों की तपोभूमि रहा है और उनका जीवन अधिकांशतः प्रकृति की गोद में ही व्यतीत हुआ है। इस शृंखला को आगे बढ़ाते हुए स्वामी सुंदरानंद जी ने अपनी कर्मभूमि विशाल हिमालय को बनाया है। निस्सन्देह 'हिमगिरि दर्शन' पुस्तक उनके दीर्घकालीन अनुभवों को समेटते हुए हिमालय की बहुमूल्य प्राकृतिक सम्पदा की अनुभूति ज्ञानवर्द्धक ढंग से कराएगी।

आशा है, यह पुस्तक न केवल जन-साधारण को हिमालय की प्रचुर संपदा व उसके प्राकृतिक महत्व के विषय में बोध कराने में सफल सिद्ध होगी अपितु प्रकृति के प्रति प्रेम भी जाग्रत करेगी। इस सत्प्रयास के लिए स्वामी सुंदरानंद जी को हार्दिक बधाई।

-अटल बिहारी वाजपेयी
(अटल बिहारी वाजपेयी)

नई दिल्ली
17 अप्रैल, 2001



Vasishtha peak

Message from the Prime Minister (Translation)

I am pleased to learn that Swami Sundaranandji is bringing out a book on *Himalaya* based on his untiring efforts spanning sixty long years.

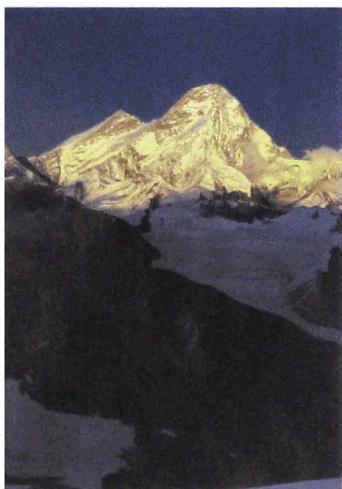
Since ancient times, India has been a land of devotion and austerities for saints and sages who have spent their lives seeking spiritual salvation in the lap of Nature. In accordance with this age old tradition, Swami Sundaranandji has chosen the vast Himalaya as his *Karma bhoomi*. Without a doubt, the book based on his in-depth experience, will bring alive for readers the invaluable heritage and natural grandeur of the Himalaya.

I hope the book will not only be instrumental in acquainting people with the great richness and natural beauty of the Himalaya, but will also awaken in them a love for Nature. I congratulate Swami Sundaranandji for this endeavour.

New Delhi

April 17, 2001

Atal Behari Vajpayee



Sunrise over Mukut peak

Foreword by Mahant Shankar Das (Translation)

*The holy Himalaya – loftiest amongst all mountains in the North.
Extending from East to West, it is veritably the landmark of the planet Earth.*

The supreme position of the Himalaya — the crown of India, cannot be over emphasized. Its social, religious, physical and strategic aspects are all vitally important to India. More than its all-encompassing significance, is its cloak of mystery. Many attempts have been made to study various aspects of the Himalaya to unravel its mysteries, but none have fully succeeded.

I am very happy to know that Swami Sundaranandji Maharaj has attempted to penetrate the mysterious Himalaya, where he has lived since his youth, where he has scaled numerous mountain peaks, and where he has climbed to great heights after crossing glaciers and snowbound vales. His unique contribution lies in his yogic sadhana, which combined with his artistic inclinations has played a very specific, invaluable role in enabling him to take rare, striking photographs of mountains, valleys, and other subjects. He has opened new vistas through the power of his limitless imagination. This book contains over 425 pictures, selected from a collection of over 50,000 transparencies.

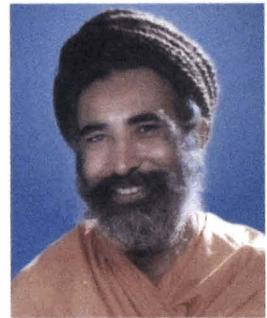
I am confident that readers will be able to understand and appreciate better the divine, immeasurable, unfathomable essence of the Himalaya. I congratulate Swami Sundaranandji and the editorial team for the publication of this book. I hope this will be the first in the series of many such books.

April 21, 2001

Mahant Shankar Das
Udaseen Panchayati Bara Akhada

Foreword

अस्त्युत्तरस्यां दिशि देवतात्मा
हिमालयो नाम नगाधिराजः ।
पूर्वापरौ तोयनिधी वगाह्य स्थितः
पृथिव्या इव मानदण्डः ॥



Mahant Shankardas

नगाधिराज देवतात्मा हिमालय हमारे पवित्र देश भारत माता का मुकुट ही नहीं अपितु प्रत्येक दृष्टि से अत्यधिक महत्वपूर्ण है। सामाजिक धर्मिक, भौगोलिक एवं राष्ट्रीय सुरक्षा की दृष्टि से हिमालय का अस्तित्व जितना महत्वपूर्ण है उससे कहीं अधिक यह रहस्यात्मक आवरणों से ढका हुआ है। अनुसंधानकर्ता एवं आध्यात्मिक जिज्ञासु अनन्त काल से इस पर्वतराज का अपने-अपने ढंग से अध्ययन कर इसके रहस्यों को उद्घाटित करने का प्रयास करते रहे हैं, फिर भी हिमालय आज तक एक अबूझ पहेली बना हुआ है।

बड़ी प्रसन्नता की बात है कि स्वामी सुन्दरानन्द जी महाराज ने अपनी युवावस्था से लेकर आज तक हिमालय के विभिन्न दुर्गम शिखरों की अनेक बार यात्रा कर उनका विस्तृत अध्ययन किया है और उनके गृह्य रहस्यों को उद्घाटित करने का प्रयास किया है। अपनी यौगिक साधना के तप एवं कलाकार-दृष्टि के माध्यम से स्वामी जी ने विभिन्न शिखरों एवं गहरों आदि के दुर्लभ चित्र लिये हैं और उन्हें अपनी विचित्र कल्पना शक्ति में रंग कर अनेक संभावनाओं की उद्भावना की है। इस पुस्तक में उन्होंने अपनी पचास हजार पारदर्शियों में से लगभग सवा चार सौ उत्कृष्ट पारदर्शियों का समावेश किया है।

मुझे पूर्ण विश्वास है कि इस पुस्तक के माध्यम से हम देवतात्मा हिमालय के विराट स्वरूप का दर्शन कर उसे आत्मसात् कर सकेंगे।

मेरी कामना है कि स्वामी सुन्दरानन्द एवं उनके सहयोगी बन्धु जनहित में इस प्रकार की भव्य सामग्री भविष्य में भी प्रकाशित करते रहें।

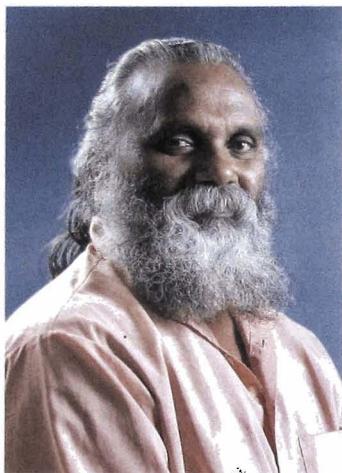
अप्रैल २१, २००१

—महंत शंकरदास

(महंत शंकरदास)

उदासीन पचायती बड़ा अखाड़ा

Preface



Swami Sundaranand

The Himalaya is not a mere mountain range for Indians. Nor is it just a tourist destination. It is a place of variegated richness, a revered place of pilgrimage. Most Hindus wish that at least once in their lifetime they be blessed with the opportunity to pay homage at the holy Himalayan shrines, and with good reason. The ancient wisdom of India originated in the Himalaya. The Hindu scriptures – the *Vedas*, *Upanishadas* and *Puranas* were composed here. From times immemorial, it has been the seat of contemplation and meditation for sages, seers and poets, a place for devotion and penance for ascetics and a place of refuge for hermits. Today, the Himalaya continues to be a source of inspiration for the people of India as a repository of age-old religious traditions. It is from here that the holy Ganga, respectfully called 'Mother Ganga' by Hindus, who believe it possesses the power to expiate sins and grant salvation, begins its long journey to the sea. It is the sacred abode of Lord Shiva – the creator as well as the destroyer of the Universe in Hindu mythology. Lord Vishnu, the preserver of the Universe also has his seat here.

It is here in the lap of the lofty Himalaya that Maharishi Veda Vyas composed the great epics which have retained their distinctive appeal, religious importance and universal wisdom down the ages. And it is in the Himalaya that the *Pandavas* of *Mahabharata* fame wandered while in exile. Among the pilgrimage centres, called *dhams*, the four prominent ones located here are: Gangotri, Yamunotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath. Gangotri is the source of the river Ganga, while Yamunotri is the source of the river Yamuna. Kedarnath was established in honour of Lord Shiva by the ancient revered Guru Adi Shankaracharya. As mentioned in the *Puranas*, innumerable lakes and temples dedicated to different gods and goddesses continue to be an overwhelming feature of the Himalaya. In the eastern and western Himalaya there are several ancient Buddhist monasteries which are unique in their style of worship, tradition, art and culture.

The Himalaya has been my home for over half a century. My humble *kuti*, in which I have lived alone in the severest of winters without any kind of comforts and conveniences is situated in the remote reaches of Gangotri. I have covered the length and breadth of the Himalaya, scaled inaccessible heights, explored the depths of the valleys and have ventured into regions where no one had ever set foot. I have climbed many soaring peaks, crossed several tough glaciers, walking alone for days and nights, and have savoured fully the splendour and beauty of these mighty ranges. With the grace of God and my venerable Gurudev Swami Tapovanam Maharaj, I was fortunate to study closely the exquisite play of Nature in this vast mountain range, its environment, flora and fauna and the changes and transformations that took place over the years. I have also travelled to the lower Himalaya and witnessed the colourful, ritualistic life of the people, their unflinching faith, and their never ending daily struggle.

It must have been ordained in my *karma* that a yogi, an ascetic, a lover of art and natural beauty at heart should turn into an avid photographer of the Himalaya. In the twilight of my life, an inner urge compelled me to share a wide

range of experiences by publishing a book with a selection from my collection of photographs of this abode of gods. It is the same urge which once made me renounce worldly pursuits and surrender to the service of my Guru. Later, unable to resist the call of the mountains, I decided to capture with a camera the inaccessible regions, the majestic mountain peaks, the glaciers and sheer beauty of the Himalaya and its people.

Aum is the most prominent name of the omnipresent God. In the course of my wanderings in the Himalaya, I found *Aum* manifested in Nature everywhere – stamped on the mountains, visible in the flow of rivers, painted on the leaves, formed in the clouds, sculpted on the mossy rocks, etc. (pp. 56, 72, 117, 162, 207, 239).

At the invitation of people from different parts of the country, I have been presenting slide-shows which have met with a very good reception. The charm of the slide-shows is enhanced by the commentary of personal reminiscences connected with each transparency, even though I am not fluent in Hindi, as it is not my mother tongue. Appreciative audiences have been pressing me for a number of years to publish my slides in book form, together with my experiences.

It has been a difficult endeavour. How does one compress in the space of a book the chequered events of half a century of living, meditating, travelling, climbing and recording natural beauty of the mountains, along with the sweet-sour impressions, intellectual debates, the mythology and tales associated with the eternal mountains ? And on top of it all, out of the 50,000 pictures that I cherish so much, which to pick and which to leave?

The environmental damage to the Himalaya hurts me deeply. I am also worried about the religious traditions dying in the face of an onslaught from tourism and so called modernity. Through this humble work I wish to document for posterity the pristine beauty and the great significance of this ancient venerable mountain range before much of it is lost. My effort is akin to the effort of the squirrel in the epic Ramayana. The squirrel had contributed its might to the construction of a bridge which took Lord Rama across the sea to Lanka. My request to readers and friends is to consider this work in that modest capacity, as I am a self-taught photographer who never had any formal training or schooling. The slides included in this collection date from 1956 and were taken during wanderings, climbing expeditions, path finding explorations and days and nights spent camping on glaciers at great heights. Some of the pictures record geographical changes, degradation of the environment and life of people in the Himalaya.

The most important reason for publishing this book is to acknowledge the debt I owe to the Himalaya. I beg to be forgiven for any mistakes and shortcomings which may have crept into this book.



A naturally formed rare Shivalinga at the author's kuti.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Swami Sundaranand".

(Swami Sundaranand)

Acknowledgements



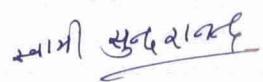
The publication of this book is the fruit of kindness of the omnipotent God and blessings of my Guru late Swami Tapovanam Maharaj. I bow before them in gratitude. I am an humble being with no material resources or competence. The onerous task of bringing out this publication could be accomplished only with the help of friends and well wishers. The book benefitted immensely by their contributions. The day I resolved to undertake the daunting project, help came in ample measure from various quarters lessening my burden and worries. I shall never be able to repay their debt.

I am very grateful to Shri Saral Kumar, who volunteered to take notes that I dictated as a prelude to preparing the manuscript; to Ms Veenu Sandal for final editing; and to Mr Vinay Aditya, who designed the book. I would like to thank Prof. Vidya Ratna for the important task of conceptualisation of the book and coordination, and Mr S.K. Venkatraman of Systems Vision for technical support.

I thank from the core of my heart Swami Tejomayanandji, President of the Chinmaya Mission, who on learning about the project advanced a substantial sum of money. Without that crucial seed-money the project could not have taken off. I shall remain grateful to Mr Satish Chandra Mishra, Smt Kalpana Mishra, Hon'ble Judge Shri V.K. Maheshwari, Mr R.R. Aggrawal and Shri V.K. Sharma who placed orders for a large number of copies of the book in advance. I shall be failing in my duty if I do not mention and thank photographer Ghanshyam Aggrawal of Jaipur and Mr Thrish Kapoor of Almora, who also came forward with large amounts as booking-advance.

Blessings, good wishes and help came from the mother of Shri Jairam Jaisinghani, Shri Jauhari Lal, Director ONGC, Mr K.K. Aggrawal of Messrs Jaiprakash Industries Ltd. – Chief of Tehri Dam Project, DCP Shri Dinesh Bhatt, Mr H.C. Kapravan of Defence Science Research Organisation, Nautiyal Brothers, Shambhu Prasad and Anand Prasad and Smt Gayatri Devi & Parvati Devi of Hyderabad. The trustees of Lakshmi Narayana Mandir (Birla Mandir, New Delhi), have also been very helpful.

Lastly, I wish to express my gratitude to all friends and well-wishers whose names should have been included in the roll of credits, but constraint of space does not permit.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Swami Sundaranand".

(Swami Sundaranand)

Contents



Himalaya
An ageless body,
a timeless mind



186

Different
Faces and
Moods of the
Himalaya

2



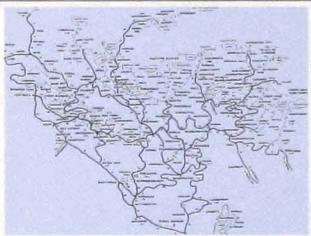
Pilgrims Final
Destination—
Badrinath

202



Central
Himalaya

12



Tourists Delight—
Kumaon and
Other Regions

228



Wandering in
Gangotri Area

54



Environmental
Degradation

252



Gomukh and
Beyond

102



Unity in
Diversity

268



Kedar Valley
and Yonder

166



Swami who
Clicks –
A Biographical Sketch

286

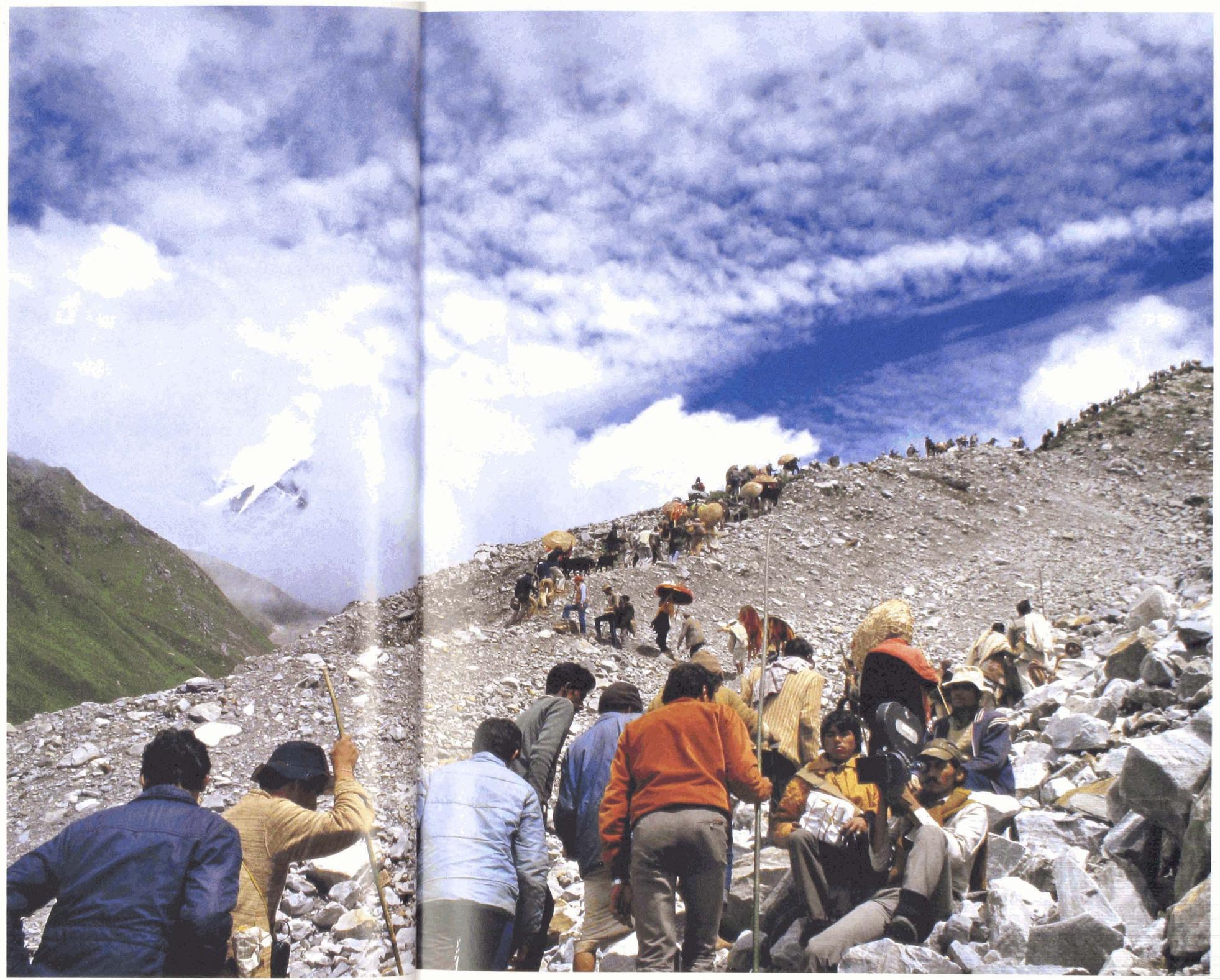


Different Faces and Moods of the Himalaya

From times immemorial, there has been a mystique, an irresistible majestic beauty, a universal magnetic appeal about the Himalaya. The many faces and many moods of the Himalaya continue to mean different things to different people and yet they have something unique for everybody. They have rugged grandeur and stretches of inhospitable, snow covered ranges interspersed with soft, misty valleys with sparkling, tinkling streams, lakes and forests whose beauty has to be seen. The highest mountain in the world, the snow capped, cloud bedecked peaks of the Himalaya soar skyward – a stunning visual feast, but also a symbolic reminder, an inspiration that reaching upwards, beyond oneself can take one to new heights.

Down the ages, the Himalaya have inexorably drawn towards them a vast cross-section of humanity. For those seeking spiritual salvation, they remain the ultimate goal. Ascetics have long been a part of the Himalayan landscape. Some of the revered Hindu pilgrimage centres and the most ancient Buddhist monasteries can be found amongst the Himalayan heights along with countless fascinating legends – making them a hallowed destination for pilgrims. For mountaineers from the world over, they have long presented supreme challenges. And their soft, appealing call continues to beckon adventurers and lovers of beauty, cutting across religious barriers. Age, region, country, professions become irrelevant in the context of the magnetic power of the multi-dimensional Himalaya – they offer happiness, hope, and their wonderful range of riches interwoven with mesmerising legends to everyone. Nandadevi Raj Jat procession is one such poignant example.

Boasting a rich mythological history, the Himalaya are also the source of some of India's greatest rivers. With a long geological past, they are a rare treasure-



Clouds, snow peaks, mountains, glaciers, rivers, people etc. mirror different faces of the Himalaya.
The last stretch of the ascent to Homkund during Nandadevi Raj Jat procession.



moving towards the northwest and ultimately collided with the Tibetan plateau. In terms, it is claimed that due to subterranean changes, the land mass of India began in the deserts has been discovered and is now utilized for farming. In layman's places in the Himalaya, deposits of non-stick soil – the kind of which is found and rounded stones discovered in the higher plains bear evidence to this. At many rivers of India used to flow into this northern sea. The fossils of sea animals, sand by the sea. The now extinct sea in the north was known as Tethys sea. Some still continuing. Ages ago, it is said, India was an island covered on all sides Himalaya are younger than other mountain ranges and the process of its formation are described as the western, central and eastern Himalaya. It is believed that the Himalaya, the middle Himalaya and the higher Himalaya. Geographically, they High-wise, the Himalaya can be divided into three parts – the lower

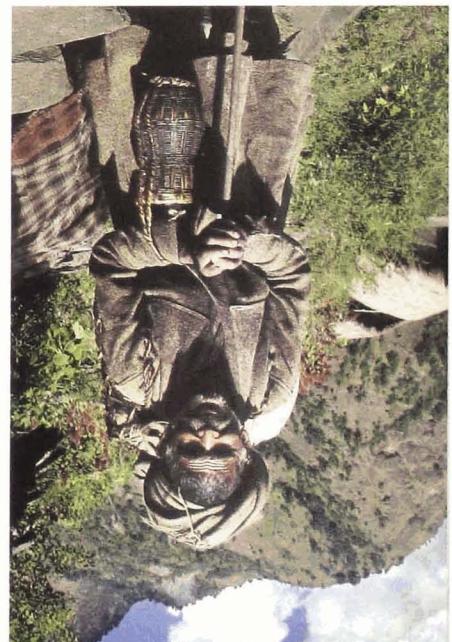
7,50,000 sq. kms. Translated literally, the name means, "the abode of snow". Myanmars, the Himalaya run for 2,500 kilometres covering an area of over 250 to 300 kms in depth. From northern Afghanistan in the west to northern also constitute the longest mountain chain in the world and are approximately Statistically, the Himalaya are not just the highest mountains in the world – they

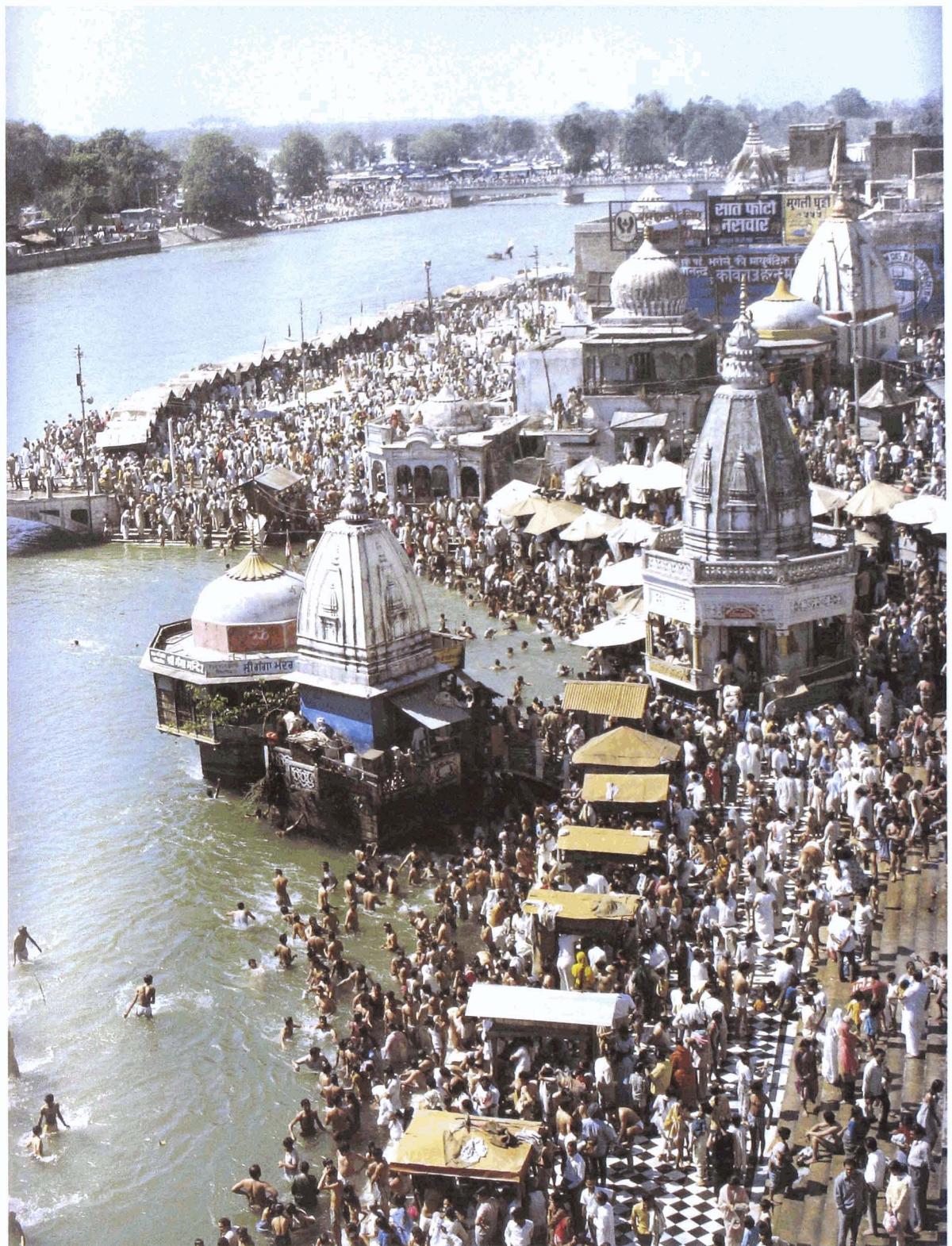
Geology, Geography and History

of smelting life styles. Ancient traditions are still alive in the Himalaya, though house of bio-diversity, of a range of minerals, of a variety of wildlife, and a number the majority of old trade routes which connected India, Tibet and China are no longer an economic lifeline.

A soft-portrait of the author at Kedarnath. The crystal clear waters of the lake surrounded by snow clad peaks provide the perfect ambience for meditation.

An old man from Budha village on the path to Shashikant.





Some of the greatest rivers of India, like the Ganga, emerge from the Himalayan glaciers and form lifelines of faith for countless people. Devotees taking a holy dip in the Ganga at Brahma Kund, Har-ki-Pauri, Haridwar, during the Poorna Kumbha, 1986.

The Great Himalayan Ranges





Exotic flowers at Bhojvasa, situated at a height above 11,000 ft.

The beautiful Dondhi Lake — the origin of the river Asi, mirrors the vegetation around.

The Himalaya were created as a result of this collision. The movement of India towards the northwest is still continuing and as a result the height of the Himalaya increases by a few centimetres every year.

After the birth of the Himalaya, some of the older north Indian rivers became choked, changed course and started flowing into the Bay of Bengal. Later still, some rivers like the legendary Saraswati disappeared. Researchers have now discovered that the Saraswati, which used to flow as a mighty river till 3,000 BC but disappeared around 1,500 BC got lost in the Himalayan regions due to the tectonic disturbances. Adored as the Ambitama, Naditama and Devitama (best of all mothers, best of all rivers and best of all goddesses) in Vedic literature, the Saraswati river used to perennially flow from the Har-ki-Doon glacier up to Somnath in Gujarat, undulating through the receding glaciers in the Himalayan region, Shivalik foothills, semi-arid desert zones in today's Rajasthan and the marshy Rann of Kutch in Saurashtra. Researchers have reason to believe that the Saraswati was desiccated due to several geological factors, but primarily due to tectonic disturbances which might have raised the basin and beds of the flowing waters of the river in the Himalayan region. The Saraswati choked up as the flowing waters from the Har-ki-Doon glacier (Bandarpoonch massif) changed course. Such changes in the geographical features of the Himalaya continue to be an issue of deep study for the geologists.

As is often the case, mythology and the historical or geological views overlap at places and are divergent at other points. For instance, in all the Puranas, India is referred to as "Bharat Khand in Jambu Dweep." Even today during worship and formal ceremonies, the priests record events as happening in "Bharat Khand





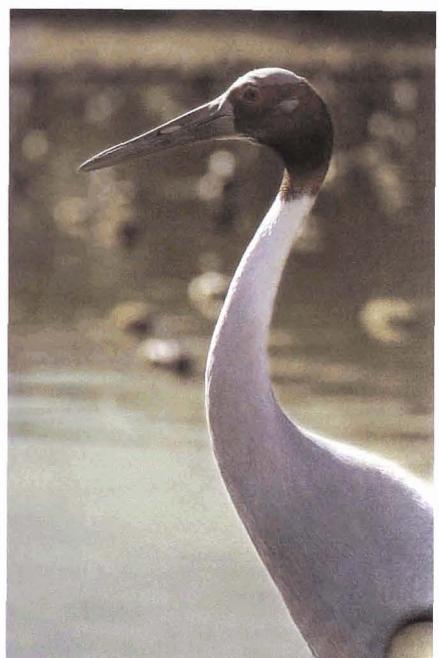
Mountain goats: naturally well-equipped for the intensely cold Himalayan winter.

in Jambu Dweep" and trace the lineage to some ancient rishi. This and the story of the descent of the Ganga from the Himalaya seem to be rooted in geological reality. According to common belief, the Ganga got locked in the matted hair of Lord Shiva. Jahnu rishi got it freed from the locks of Shiva and the Ganga started flowing again. Therefore Ganga is also known by the name of Jahnavi. There is also a place in the Himalaya which goes by the name of Jahnu rishi. In course of time the fame of Ganga's purity spread throughout India. A mere glimpse of the Ganga is considered fortunate. The opportunity to bathe in its waters is considered even more auspicious. It is said that consumption of a few drops of Ganga water is enough to expiate sins and is an efficacious form of atonement. Leaving aside the spiritual dimension, the fact is that the Ganga in its journey through the Himalaya passes over rock and mineral formations of different kinds and through areas rich in medicinal herbs. Its waters are bound to be special.

Himalayan Flora and Fauna

The Himalayan ranges are also home to an amazing variety of flora and fauna – musk deer, tigers, leopards, bears, beautiful birds, butterflies, insects and exotic plants. In the valley of Kedar Ganga, for instance, there are many animals. Herds of snow deer sometimes come close to the camps. A herd comprises 25-50 deer which are covered with thick param (fine wool). The best way to invite them to come closer is to pour salt outside the camp, for they love to lick salt. Sadly, poachers exploit their weakness for salt to kill these innocent animals. The skin of snow deer is very soft and warm and carries a high price. Local people eat its flesh. The hill hunters trap musk deer in a noose and kill them. The author has

A crane visits Kedar Taal, ht 17,000 ft.





Step farming in Garhwal making an interesting southern tip of the Indian map.

removed many such nooses in high valleys, and even made a collection of them. The musk deer differs a great deal in nature from the snow deer. Generally, deer are afraid of man and on being alerted by the herd leader, they disappear in a trice over the mountains. Only the herd leader keeps watch behind. Musk is concentrated in the navel of male deer which have protruding teeth. The musk remains hanging in a pouch near its navel. A single deer provides 25 to 70 grams of musk. It is said that the musk is sold to the smugglers at the rate of rupees one thousand per gram. This is an extremely well organized racket known only to a selected few.

The markets for musk are supposed to be in Delhi and Amritsar. The traders of Delhi and Amritsar visit the villages every year to buy musk and also give advance payment to the hunters. There are very few musk deer left now. There was a time when they would fearlessly come down to Gangotri. The author has many times found musk deer resting behind his cottage at night. The rear legs of a musk deer are 4 inches longer than the front legs. Except for the mating season, the male deer lives alone. It normally rests at one place at night and wanders in the forest during the day. From its fresh dung the hunters can make out that the deer had rested there at night. They put the noose trap on its path, or shoot it if they sight it. The body of the deer and the musk

is distributed in the proportion of two parts for the hunter and one part for his helpers. One can recognise the camps of these hunters from the fires burning at uninhabitable heights.

Himalayan forests

The natural law of the growth of trees, vines, flowers, roots, herbs and other vegetation on the higher reaches of Himalaya is very different from that of the lower mountains and plains. It is a matter of grave concern that once the forests of the Himalaya are destroyed, it will be extremely difficult to revive them. The scattering and sprouting of their seeds depends upon the high velocity winds,

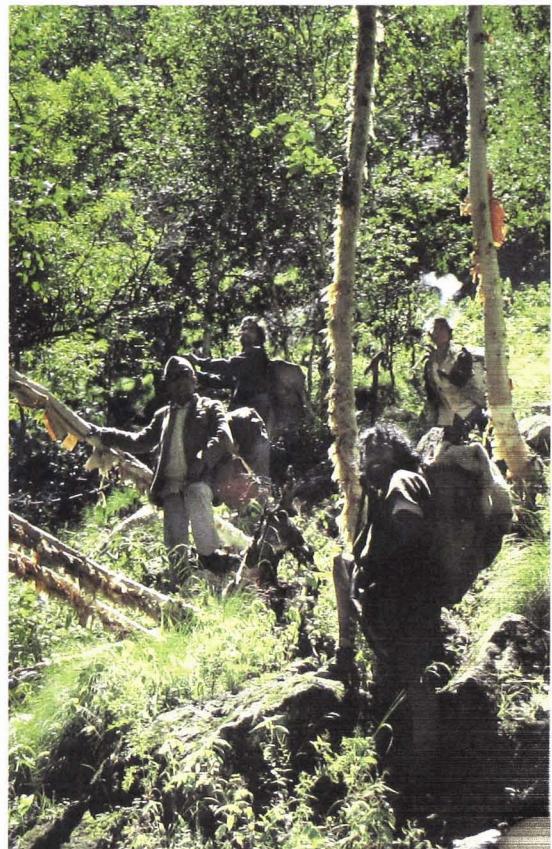


Gangotri forest in the winter of 1985. The tragedy of large scale denudation can now be witnessed in this forest.

snowfall and melting of the snow. Trees like Deodar, Kail, Cheed and Rai-muraind grow on slopes, pits, rocks and even in the recesses of rocks. The seeds of these trees are so light that they rise high even with a soft breeze. With high velocity winds they travel to sky-high peaks, valleys, snow-clad rocks, slopes, landing even in rock recesses. The seeds of shrubs travel with the melting snow. Similarly, the seeds of herbs travel to soil deposited at several places. That is why the Himalayan forests are not a mixed variety. All Himalayan trees cannot grow everywhere. Generally, there are exclusive colonies of one species of trees or vegetation. Thus there won't be a Bhoj (birch) tree where there is Deodar. The lowest height forests are those of Kail or Cheed. Above them grow Deodar, then Bhoj and even higher than them, Thelu (juniper). The Thelu seed is round and spreads with landslides or the melting of snow. It also gets distributed through bird droppings. The seed of the Bhoj tree has a special shape because of which it rises in the air and falls around, thus giving root to special groves of Bhoj forests.

In the same manner there are thick colonies of one variety of flowers alone at one place. That is the reason why the flower of one valley is not found in another valley. Their time of sprouting and blooming also differs. Large beds of flowers are found in the valleys, as if specially arranged and decorated. It is a sight fit for the gods. The Garhwal Himalaya alone have scores of such valleys of flowers. Their beauty is enhanced when a rivulet flows through them or they surround a pond in thick masses. Man's intervention in nature is a sure invitation to disaster. Fortunately many of these areas are beyond the everyday reach of man. ☺

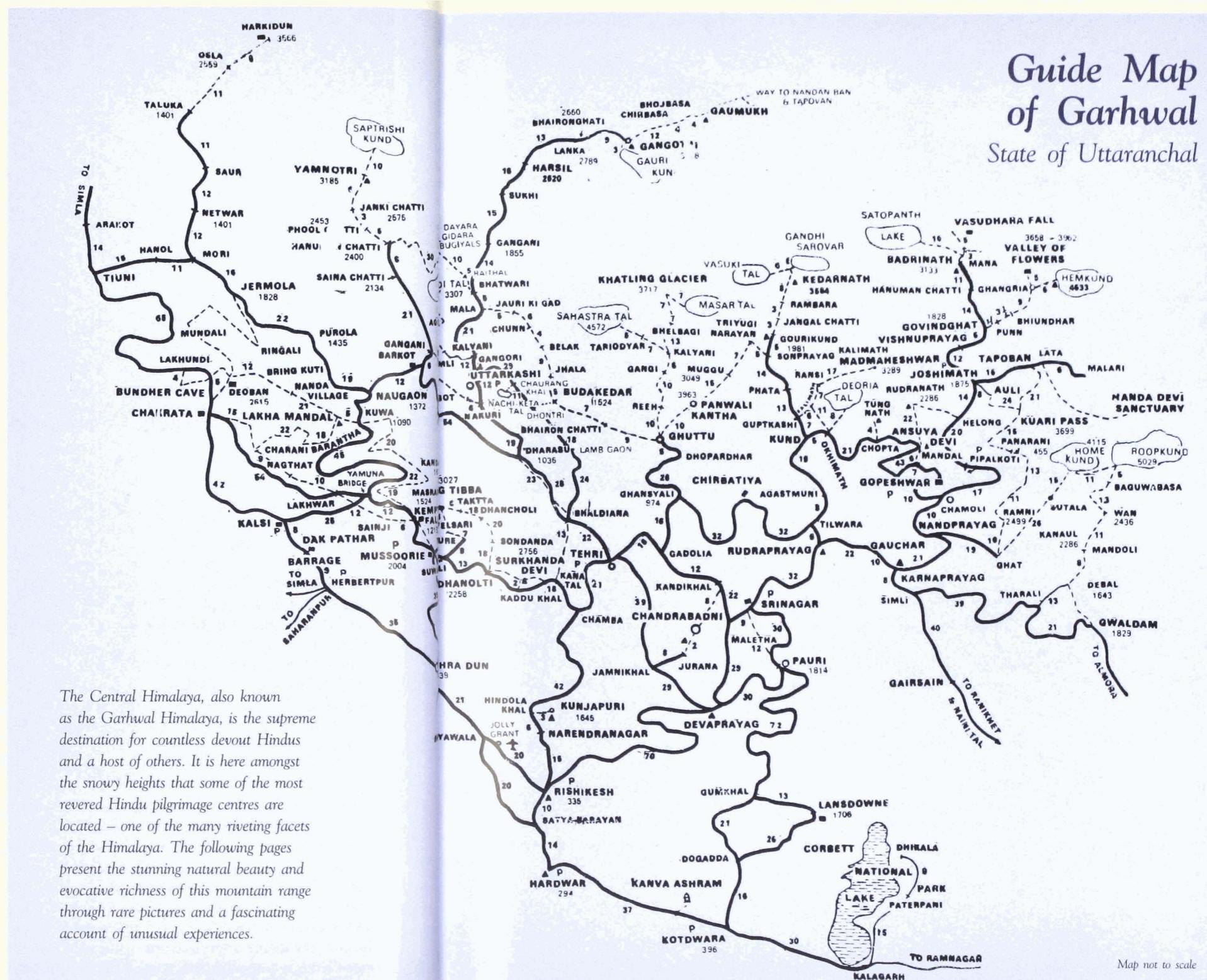
The Bhojwasa forest in 1964. Reckless deforestation has now turned it into a barren landscape.



Central Himalaya

Though each of the Himalayan regions is special, it is the central region, known as the Garhwal Himalaya, which is unique geologically and geographically. It is strikingly rich in natural beauty and has an old, distinguished religious and spiritual heritage. This is the mythological land of gods. This is the region often referred to as heaven upon earth. It is here amidst the stunning beauty of the Garhwal Himalaya that some of the greatest and the world's highest pilgrimage centres are located. Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri, Yamunotri, Hemkund, Dev Prayag – to mention but a few – these are names which carry a special connotation for millions and millions of Indians, particularly Hindus. For many of them, their life's journey is not complete without a visit to these shrines. Here amongst the glacial heights, lies the world famous Valley of Flowers and several other equally beautiful valleys. Here lie lakes like Roopkund, steeped in mythology and mystery. Towering peaks like those of Nandadevi stand in unparalleled grandeur, guarding the precious heritage of the region. Whereas the adjoining Kumaon region attracts tourists for its beauty and greenery, the Garhwal region is pilgrimage-oriented. From remote corners of the country come pilgrims rich and poor. They come to these Himalayan ranges made holy by – amongst a host of other elements – the rivers Yamuna, Bhagirathi (Ganga is known by this name in its upper reaches), Mandakini, and Alaknanda – the last three converging to form the Ganga, and innumerable mystical valleys where sages with matted hair and hardly a shred of clothing have meditated since Puranic times. The Pandavas – the heroes of the epic Mahabharata – and their wife Draupadi, wandered in the Garhwal Himalaya, it is said, to expiate for the sin of exterminating their kith and kin in the great war. Today, the story of the Pandavas continues to be a part of the culture of the people of Garhwal. Songs of the Pandavas are sung in the villages and a Pandava dance is performed in which Draupadi features prominently. The Puranas and Vedic literature sing praises of the valleys and mountains of Garhwal Himalaya alone.

The Central Himalaya, also known as the Garhwal Himalaya, is the supreme destination for countless devout Hindus and a host of others. It is here amongst the snowy heights that some of the most revered Hindu pilgrimage centres are located – one of the many riveting facets of the Himalaya. The following pages present the stunning natural beauty and evocative richness of this mountain range through rare pictures and a fascinating account of unusual experiences.



Map not to scale



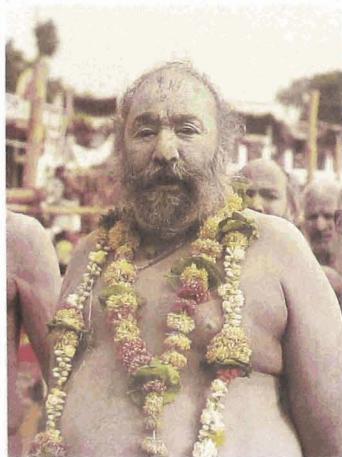
A trekker enroute to Gomukh, the source of the mighty Ganga.

It is considered *Dev Bhumi* – the sacred land of the gods and an endless, powerful source of spiritual inspiration for generations.

The Story of the Ganga

Why is the Ganga so special? The Ganga and its sister, the Yamuna, are the youngest rivers of India and flow almost at surface level once they enter the plains, in contrast to the older rivers such as the Narmada, Krishna, Kaveri and Chambal which have cut their banks deep. Tradition has it that the Yamuna – daughter of the Sun and the sister of Yamraj, the God of Death – is the elder sister of Ganga, having been in existence before Ganga. The origin of the Ganga is considered to be Gangotri in the Garhwal Himalaya although now, because the glacier has receded, it actually rises from the womb of the Gomukh glacier, 18 kilometres upstream. It is believed that the spout of the Gangotri glacier was once at Gangotri itself, but receded to the north later. According to Indian mythology, the flow of the Ganga – India's most holy river – had been blocked in the Himalaya. Raja Bhagirath, the king of Ayodhya, turned the flow of the river towards the Indian land mass. The work was actually begun by one of his ancestors, king Sagar. One of the names by which the Ganga is known is Jahnavi. According to the Kedar Purana, in ancient times rishi Jahnu had his ashram on the banks of the river on the way to Gangotri. When the floods came and the Ganga swept away the rishi's hut, he got so angry that he drank up the entire river. Thus the Ganga became invisible. When Raja Bhagirath came to him and pleaded with him to let the Ganga go, the rishi obliged by cutting his thigh and letting the Ganga flow. One can surmise from

Mangalgiri, a Naga sadhu, in full-fledged 'attire'.

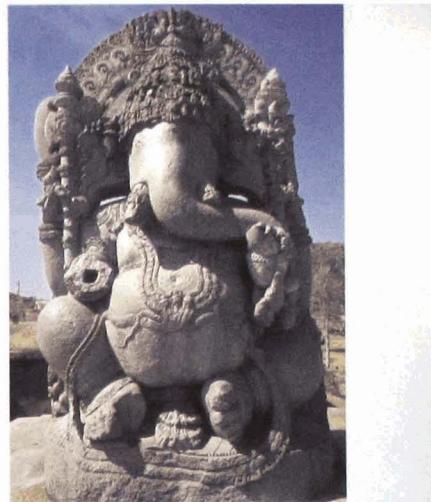


this story that the rishi may have been helpful in changing the course of the Ganga.

Ganga water is so pure that at the time of death, a few drops are poured in every Hindu's mouth. This is also considered to be the last wish of a dying person. No worship can be conducted without the pure water from the Ganga, or some other river. This is not merely symbolic but has a far deeper meaning. It is a pity that we have not been able to save the Ganga from pollution right from its source upto its descent into the sea. Keeping the Ganga clean has become a big challenge for the country.

The Pilgrimage

Till 1950, it was the struggle of a lifetime to visit the four major holy centres in the Garhwal Himalaya – Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri and Yamunotri. The pilgrimage was done on foot during the course of which one braved some of the most difficult ascents, treacherous landslides, walked along narrow *kutcha* paths, skirting deep gorges, ravines, through forests, forded raging, tumultuous rivers and crossed forbidding glaciers . Traders too brought their goods, undertaking arduous journeys on the backs of mules. Today, with the march of time, all these places can be reached by permanent, all-season roads. All through the pilgrimage season which runs from April, when the snow begins to melt to the beginning of the monsoons, these roads witness a regular stream of buses, trucks, cars and other vehicles carrying pilgrims from all corners of India and rest of the world. Earlier this pilgrimage was undertaken by a few hundred pilgrims and sadhus only. Now the number of visitors is in lakhs. Not surprisingly, there have been major changes in the Himalaya and even further changes are to be expected. These changes



An ancient intricately carved image of Lord Ganesha at Halebid.

NEXT SPREAD: While some seek salvation, thousands wait to wash-away their sins at the holy ghats of the Ganga at Har-ki-Pauri, Haridwar on the occasion of Kumbha.

Dusk and spiritual discourse merge on the bank of river Ganga.





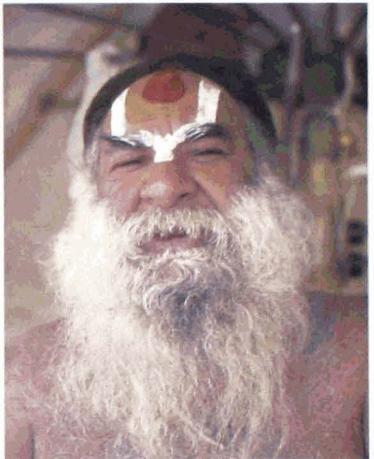


are welcome at one level, but are a major cause for concern at another level, largely because of the disastrous environmental changes they bring about in their wake. Some of the changes are irreversible and create permanent ecological imbalances.

Haridwar

The journey to Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath, Badrinath, and other pilgrimage centres and places of major interest begins in the foothill town of Haridwar or Hardwar, the 'Gateway to the Gods'. This busy town on the bank of the Ganga is also the gateway to the Garhwal Himalaya. Traditionally, pilgrims have a holy bath here, dispense alms, conduct formal worship and immerse the ashes of the dead. The importance of this town is mentioned in the Mahabharata and Puranas like Kedar Khand. On the hilltops on either side of the Ganga stand two ancient temples which can now be reached by cable cars.

There are many ancient temples in the Himalaya in Haridwar and adjoining Kankhal. Prominent among them is the Daksha Prajapati temple in Kankhal. Daksha Prajapati was a great king. According to the Puranas, he performed a big yajna to which he invited all the gods and goddesses, but left out his own son-in-law, Lord Shiva. Daksha Prajapati had felt offended because his own daughter, Parvati, had married Shiva without taking his consent. When Parvati came to know that her husband had not been invited, she became incensed and disregarding her husband's advice, she arrived at the venue of her father's yajna. Unable to bear the insult, she threw herself into the fire and sacrificed her life.

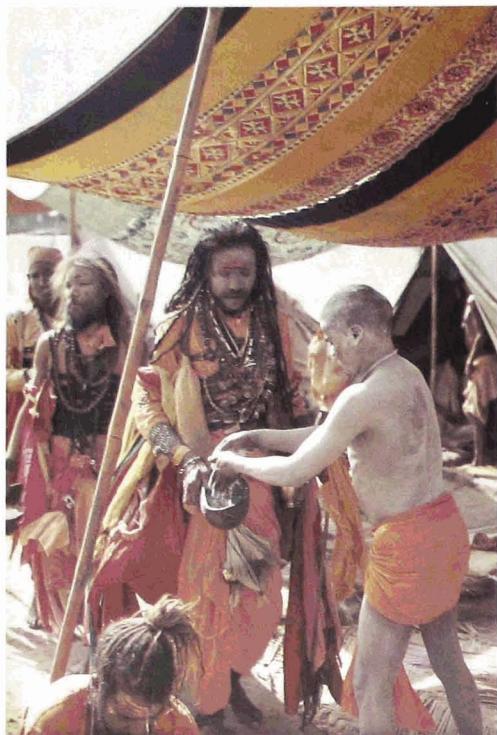


A Vaishnava sadhu with distinctive markings on his forehead.



FACING PAGE: Mahant Atmaramji rides in his chariot with ceremonial grandeur in the cavalcade at the Poorna Kumbha of 1986 at Haridwar.

Improvised screens provide privacy for changing clothes after a dip in the Ganga.



A member of Bhairavas, a sect of Lord Shiva's 'attendants'. They can accept alms only from a sanyasi. Symbols of Kaal (time), the Bhairavas do not remain still; they are always moving, or swaying. Bells, tied to their waists and feet, keep ringing continually.



The idol of Kartikeya Swami during the Kumbha cavalcade. Kartikeya is the commander of the gods' army. He is the son of Lord Shiva and brother of Ganesha. Displeased over a domestic issue, he took voluntary exile and settled in South India where he is widely worshipped as Subramanya Swami.



Mahamandaleshwar, Mandaleshwar, Mahant – the hierarchical order amongst sadhus – posing for a rare photograph before proceeding for the Kumbha Snama.



Initiation rites of new sanyasis at the river Ganga in Haridwar during the Poorna Kumbha of 1986.



Naga sadhus during the Poorna Kumbha at Haridwar, carrying lances symbolising the mythological victory of the gods over demons.



Lord Ganesha at the ancient Bharat Mandir, Rishikesh.

Devotees burning wood and cow dung cakes in the open to cook their food, add smoke to the dust haze during Kumbha at Allahabad in 1965.

At this, an infuriated attendant of Shiva, called Virbhadrā, beheaded King Daksha Prajapati and caused a lot of destruction. This is a well known story.

Today, Kankhal, also called Panchpuri or Mayapuri, is principally visited for immersing the ashes of the dead. Camps of Hindu monks known variously as Vaishnavas, Udasins and Nirmal sadhus are situated at Kankhal. The monks are given education and training here. After every 12 years a large-scale festival called Kumbha Mela is held at Haridwar in which different sects of sadhus and monks from all over India meet each other. According to mythology, the pot containing *amrita* or the Nectar of Immortality, obtained after churning the ocean, was kept at four sacred places. Kankhal in Haridwar was the fourth place where it was kept.

It is believed that during the Kumbha Mela, the Ganga waters assume the properties of nectar. Groups of sadhus and ascetics arrive with their distinctive paraphernalia to take a bath at the auspicious time. The bath by top religious leaders, known as the *shahi-snān* or the 'royal bath', is undertaken at the Brahmakund which is now known as 'Har-ki-Pauri'. After the royal bath is over, common pilgrims from all over the country take a dip in the holy waters all through the auspicious hours.

FACING PAGE:

The golden idol of Acharya Srichandra in Udaseen Panchayat, Bada Akhara in Kankhal, Haridwar. Srichandra, the founder of the Udaseen sect of Sanyasis, was the eldest son of Guru Nanak Dev.







Nagar Devi, the guardian deity of Rishikesh.

An ascetic from a Vaishnava Akhara with symbolic markings on his forehead.

Rishikesh

Sixteen kilometres upstream from Haridwar and on the left bank of the Ganga is Rishikesh, another ancient pilgrimage centre. The actual climb to the Himalaya begins here. Earlier there was a thick forest between Haridwar and Rishikesh. Today it remains only in name. Similarly, there was a time when elephants used to roam freely on the right bank of the Ganga, between Haridwar and Rishikesh. The number of elephants has dwindled lately although the area has been proclaimed a protected forest.

Rishikesh is known for the austerities that sadhus and ascetics have been performing here since ancient times. There is an old temple of Narayana (Vishnu), now known as Bharat Mandir. It is believed that the idol here was established by Adi Shankaracharya after salvaging it from the deep water of the Mayakund in the Ganga. A festival is held here on the occasion of Basant Panchami (spring in February). It is also believed that Bhakta Prahlad, a young devotee, had propitiated Narayana with the austerities he performed here. Before the construction of roads, pilgrims who could not ascend the virtually inaccessible Himalayan heights, would go round this temple 108 times and their pilgrimage was considered as accomplished. Today there are several places of meditation for sadhus and ascetics where they also get food and other facilities. For the benefit of pilgrims, there are several dharamshalas. Although traditionally dharamshalas served as free guest houses, today they are being run on a commercial basis. Rishikesh has now become a trade and transport centre. Tourists come here in large numbers and stay here in 'transit' before embarking for their chosen destinations.





The main idol at Bharat temple, Rishikesh. This ancient temple was rebuilt by Adi Shankaracharya about 1250 years ago. Bharat is one amongst the thousand names of Lord Vishnu, who it is believed, holds sway over the entire Rishikesh area.



A priest's son at Rishikesh, after the tonsure (mundan) ceremony.



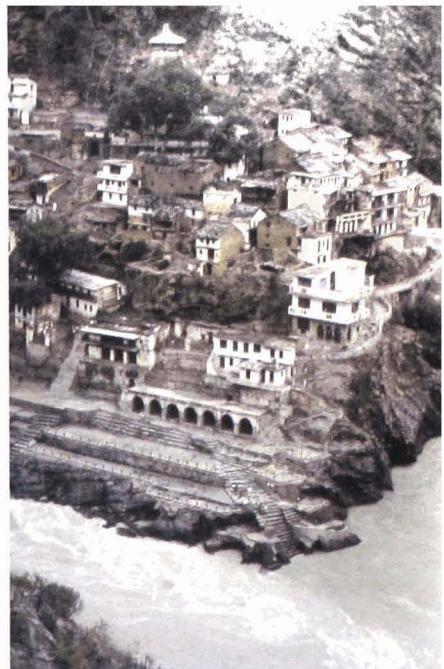
On the eastern bank of the Ganga are famous and beautiful places like Swargashram and Neelkanth Mahadev. There are two rope bridges across the Ganga, known as Ram Jhoola and Lakshman Jhoola. Pilgrims cross the river by these two bridges or by boat.

Fifty years ago the population of Rishikesh was merely 2,000 to 2,500. There was a small market which, during pilgrimage time alone, supplied walking sticks, palanquins, coolies (porters) and mules. The traders used mules and goats to transport food products. All these modes of transport have disappeared with the advent of roads. Now the town of Rishikesh boasts of a large population from Punjab, Bihar, Bangladesh and Tibet. Innumerable big and small hotels have mushroomed for the convenience of tourists. Devotees and pilgrims come from all over the country by buses and trains and sadhus and ascetics are lost in the crowd. A town once frequented chiefly by sadhus has thus become a busy commercial place.

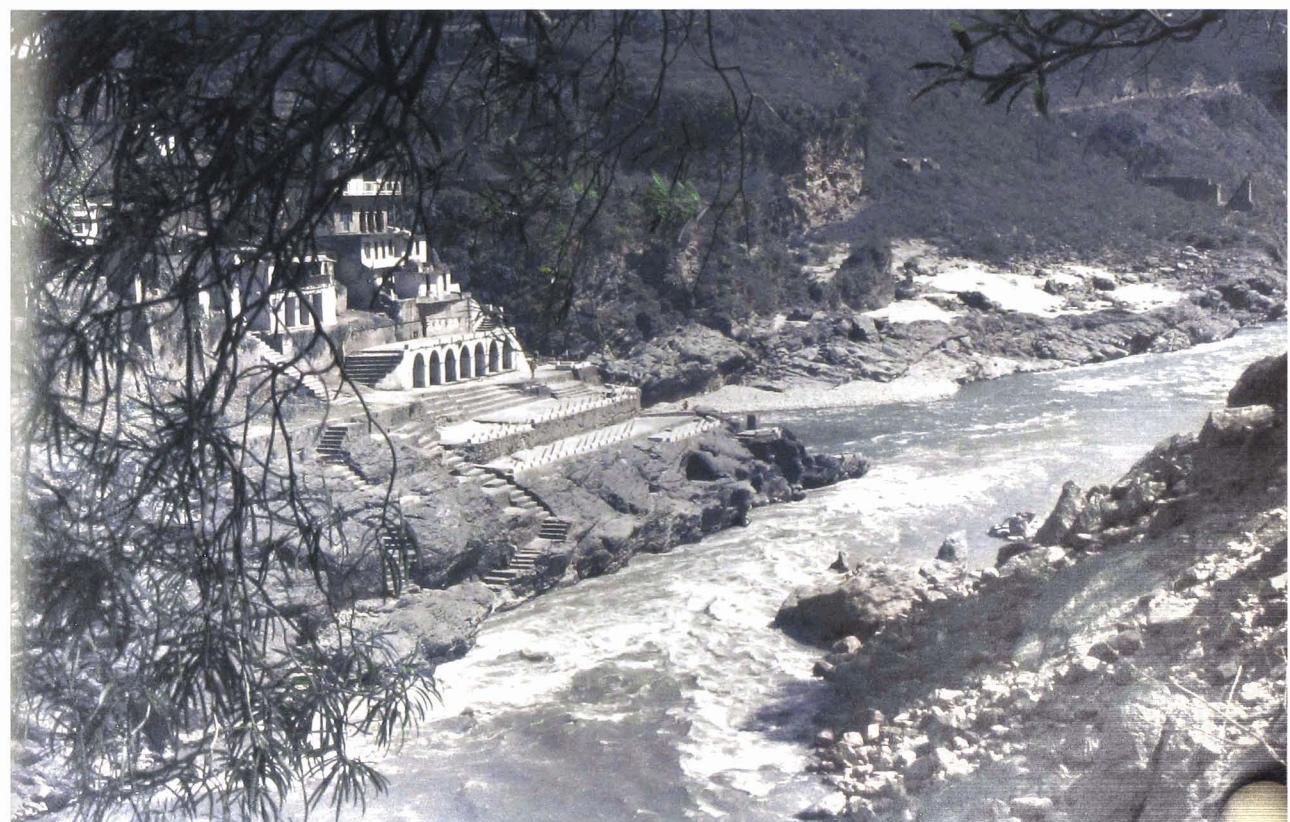
The main bathing place in Rishikesh is the Triveni Ghat where the Ganga takes a natural bend in the valley. A little above this place is Mayakund, whose significance now is merely in its name. Ashrams and residential buildings have come up here, and an embankment has been built for their protection. Above Rishikesh, after a climb of 12 kms, is Narendra Nagar, which was once the capital of Tehri province. Now it is a provincial centre and lies on the main roadway.

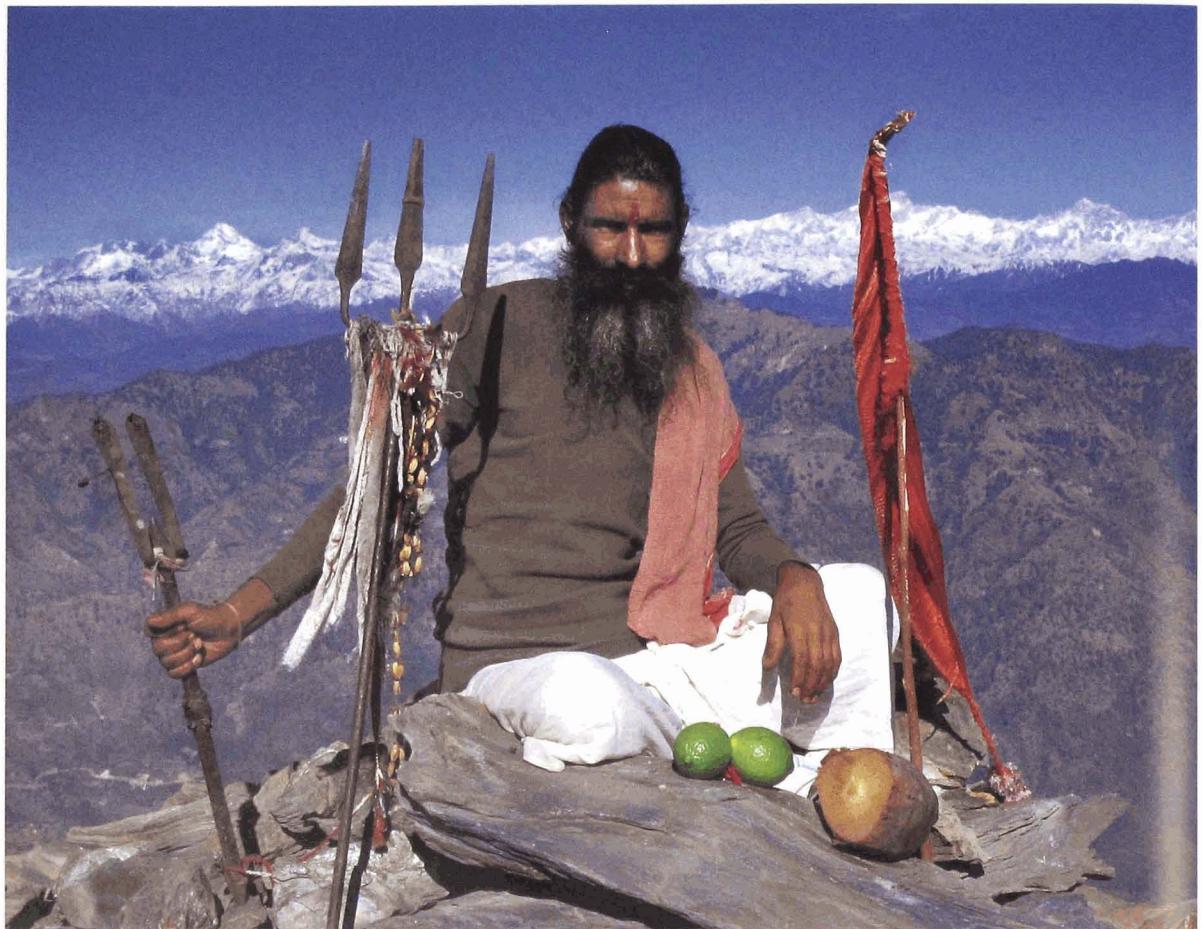
Dev Prayag

Travelling upstream, the major halt after Rishikesh is at the pilgrimage centre of Dev Prayag, which is considered the sacred grove of Lord Rama. There is an ancient temple dedicated to Raghunathji (Rama) here. The famous confluence



▲ Devprayag from two different angles showing the confluence of the Alakananda with its green water and Bhagirathi Ganga with its muddy white water. The famous Raghunathji temple can be seen in the pic above. ▼





A priest of the Chandravadini Bhakti Peetha against the backdrop of the towering peaks of Garhwal Himalaya.

FACING PAGE:
The inseparable Abhinna, Uma (goddess Parvati) and Mahesh (Lord Shiva) at Chandravadini Bhakti Peetha. Many other damaged idols from the Buddhist era, once believed to have been destroyed, have been discovered here.

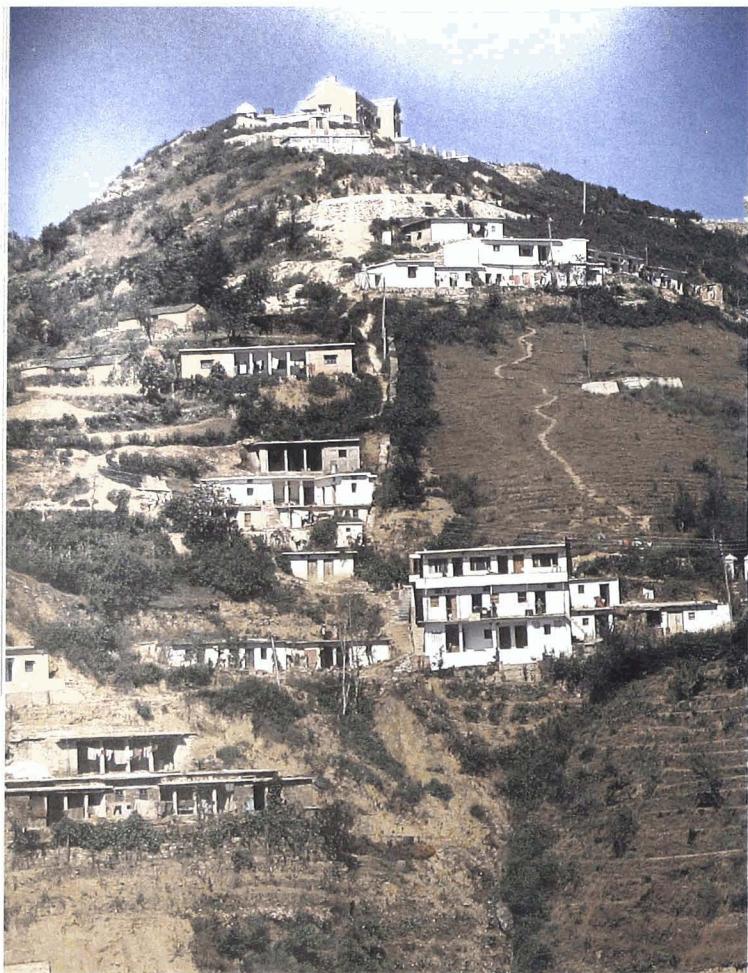
of the Bhagirathi and Alaknanda rivers takes place here and is a spectacular sight. Dev Prayag is also the residence of the priests of holy Badrinath temple. Its significance has diminished after the opening of the roadway. Earlier this place was situated amidst thick forests. Now the forest has disappeared. In its stead, the people of neighbouring villages do step-farming on the slopes. It is unfortunate that the entire filth and garbage of Dev Prayag drains straight into the Ganga.

The earlier pilgrimage on foot was along the pathway alternating between the left and right banks. At intervals of 12 kms there were resting and camping places for sadhus. They were offered cooked food by devotees. Pilgrims could also prepare their own food here and sleep for the night. Uncooked food items, utensils and wood for cooking were provided. Such camps or *chattis* have now gone out of existence.

Chandravadini

In the area between the rivers Alaknanda and Bhagirathi there is the Chandravadini Kali temple. Two more Kali temples are at Surkanda and Kunjapuri. Animal sacrifice is now banned here. Chandravadini is a beautiful place. The Himalayan peaks appear just like the formation of a half moon. The





Chamba township in Garhwal, famous for its apple orchards.



vastness of the Himalaya begins to be apparent here. Before Chandravadini is a place called Hindola Khal which has a swing in the name of Draupadi, the wife of Pandavas. Here too is the famous Bhuvaneshwar Ashram where widows are provided shelter, education and training.

Tehri

Below Chandravadini, on the right bank of Bhagirathi river is the old Tehri town which was also the capital of erstwhile Tehri state. After the end of Gorkha rule, control of the Pauri-Garhwal region of Tehri state was wrested by the British. There is now hardly any evidence of Gorkha rule. Bhilangana river also meets the Bhagirathi here. It was at Tehri that Swami Ram Tirtha had attained watery salvation in the Bhagirathi.

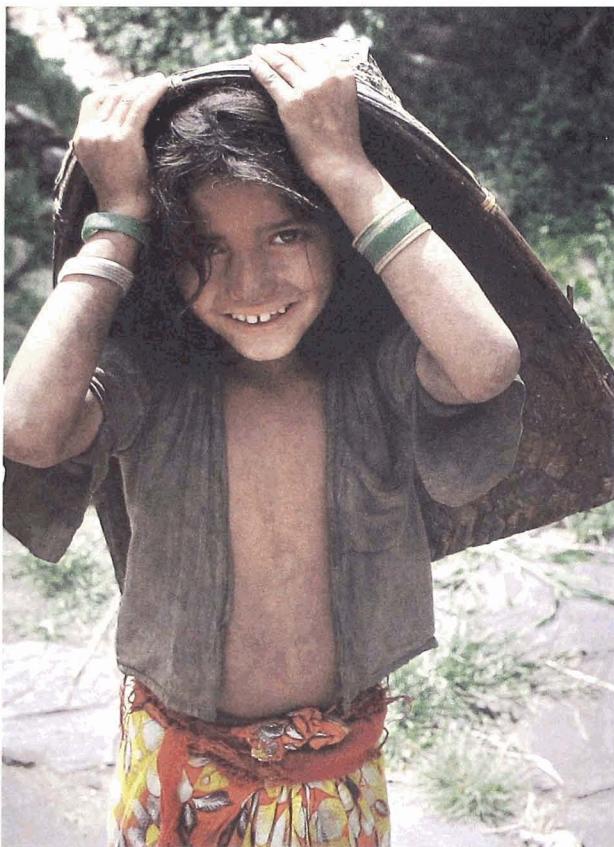
A 260 metre high earth and rock-fill dam is under construction at Tehri on river Bhagirathi down stream of its confluence with river Bhilangana. This 2,400 Megawatts project is being constructed by the renowned M/s Jaiprakash Industries Ltd. under the overall supervision of Tehri Hydro Development Corporation Ltd. Despite sporadic events of agitations by the oustees and the environmentalists, the project work is proceeding at a fast pace and is likely to be completed by the middle of the year 2004. The project is bound to bring all round prosperity specially to the states of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. In the past, dams like Bhakra on river Sutlej have brought prosperity to the country. Apart from generating electricity, the large reservoir created behind the dam shall provide irrigation facilities to 2.7 lakh hectares of U.P. and drinking water facilities to Delhi. This multi-purpose project will also help mitigate floods in the down stream areas. It is heartening that the fears raised by some quarters about the safety of dam vis a vis earthquakes have been found baseless by the various technical committees. Very satisfactory arrangements have been made for the resettlement of the oustees. A New Tehri Township has been created for the settlement of the oustees just 22 kms away amidst picturesque surroundings. On completion of the dam, the old Tehri township would be submerged in the dam reservoir.

A rare Himalayan flower that blooms from the tip of a leaf and belongs to the cactus family.



▲ Tehri dam under construction. ▼





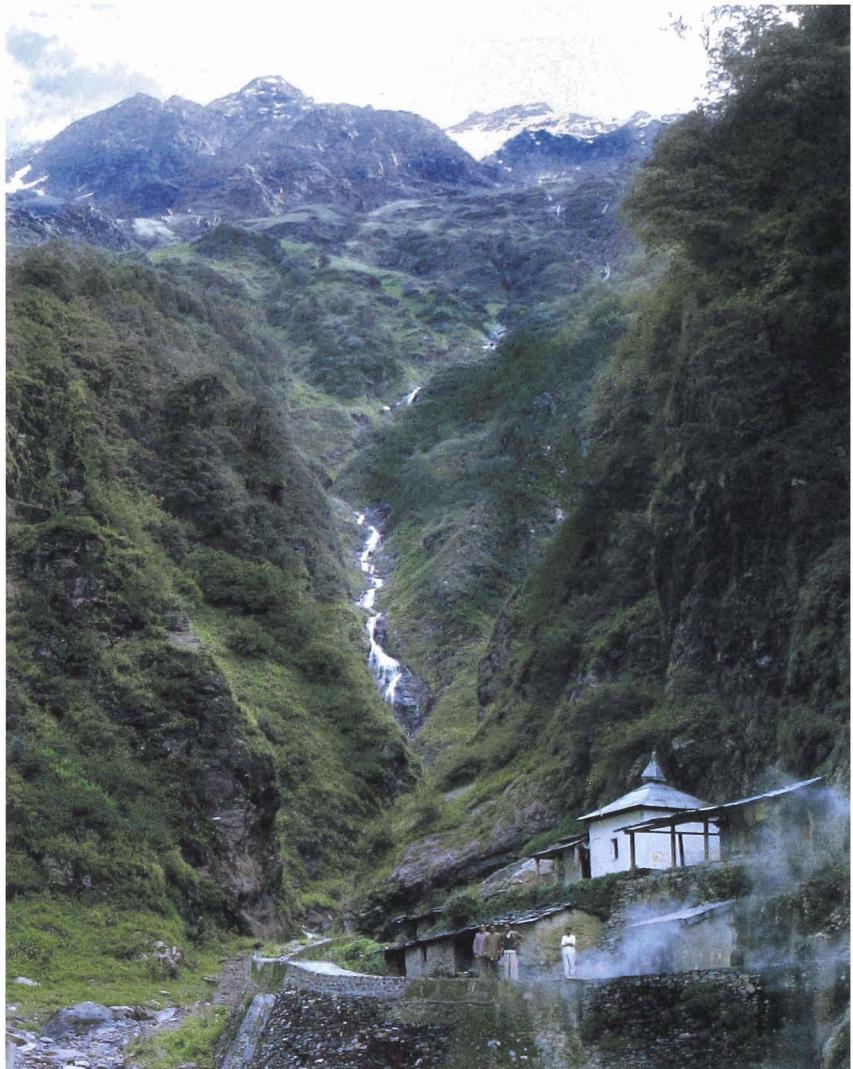
Yamunotri

The road from Tehri winds its way upwards through forests and mountains to reach Dharasu, which was once a camping site for pilgrims travelling on foot. Dharasu is on the western flank of a mountain range and thus enjoys lots of sunshine. Northwest from here lies Yamunotri, which is the source of the Yamuna river. There is now a motorable road to Yamunotri which carries heavy vehicular traffic. But this road ends at Hanuman Chatti, 18 kms short of Yamunotri. The path ahead is narrow and can be traversed only on foot or on the back of a horse, pony or mule. Some pilgrims prefer travelling in a *kandi* – a basket carried on a porter, or in a wooden palanquin carried by four porters. In this region lies a forest of Burans, which is a beautiful flower of deep red colour. It has medicinal qualities and its sherbet is very popular. When it blooms the whole area acquires a stunning deep red hue.

◀ School-age girls in the Yamuna valley, returning from the fields. Children begin shouldering responsibilities at an early age in the mountains, often at the cost of schooling. ▼



Yamunotri, at 10,450 ft, is a very cold place because of the glaciers and snow-capped mountains around. The Yamuna originates from the Bandarpooch range of mountains from where it flows downwards, piercing its way through the gorges. Near the Yamunotri temple on the right bank is a hot water spring. Weary pilgrims feel refreshed after sprinkling themselves with water of this spring. The temperature of the spring water is so high that one can even cook rice, boil potatoes or prepare any other dish in it. A cloud of hissing steam hangs above the spring almost continuously. Once, it is said, a careless person fell into it and was steamed alive. It is a kind of blessing that such hot water emerges from the bowels of the earth in an excessively cold region like Yamunotri. Below the spring, the water of Yamuna is ice cold. Formal worship is performed at an old Yamuna temple here by pundits. In the village below, the old wooden houses of the priests are artistically built. It is believed that Swami Ram Tirtha walked upstream along the Yamuna and was able to reach Gangotri from there – a feat which has not yet been repeated. To the west of Bandarpooch range is the Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh.



The temple and hot water springs at Yamunotri – the source of the river Yamuna. In the background are the snow-covered peaks of Bandarpooch massif.



Bhagirath Kharak mountain as viewed from Koteshwar peak.



An ancient idol of Mahishasur Mardini, one of the forms of the goddess Kali.

Saumya Varanasi (ancient name of Uttarkashi) is situated between the rivers Varuna and Asi, which flow into the Ganga in this valley.

Uttarkashi

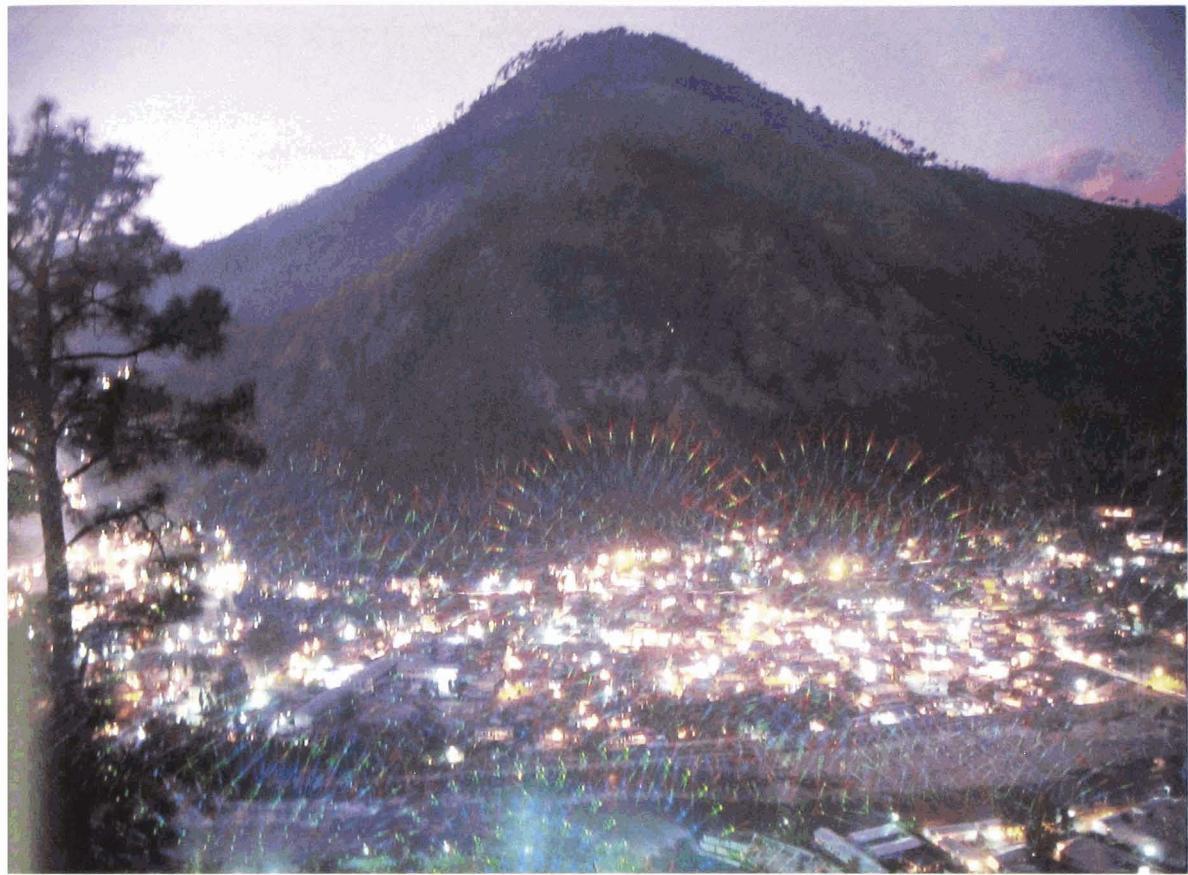
From Hanuman Chatti on the Yamunotri route there is a narrow pathway which leads to Uttarkashi via Nakuri, Matli and Barheti. It was once used for pilgrimage to the major centres. The region is extremely beautiful. The Varuna river meets the Ganga at Barheti. Above Barheti is the pilgrimage centre of Uttarkashi. Its Puranic name is Saumya (serene) Varanasi. As evident from the name, it is considered as holy as Varanasi. Just as in Varanasi, there are temples and bathing ghats in Uttarkashi which have been given similar names. There is an old temple of Shiva-Shakti here. Local people and the Tibetans used to call this place Bara Haat. Every year during summer, the Tibetans used to come here to sell their wool, carpets, salt and take back food items and other products. In those days salt was a precious commodity in the Himalaya.

Till 1948, the population of Uttarkashi was in some hundreds only. But now it has become a big town with the arrival of a large number of settlers from Punjab and other Indian states. It is the headquarters of Uttarkashi district.

On the right side of the town is the Varnavat mountain. About 100 years ago the Ganga used to flow on the right side of the Shiva-Shakti temple. It appears that after some great upheaval, its basin shifted and it started flowing on the left side of the temple. A photograph of that time is available which confirms this transformation.

The Nehru Mountaineering Training Centre in Uttarkashi is a unique sight. The author got formal training of mountaineering here in the very first batch.

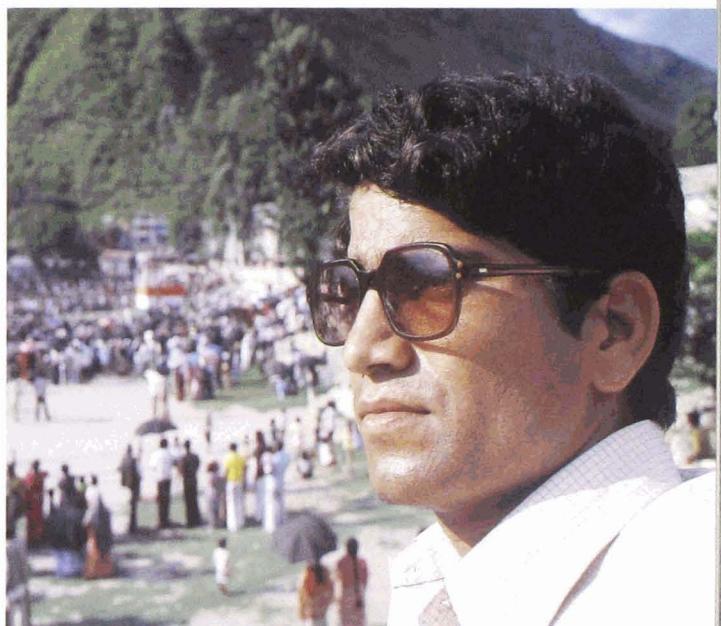




Uttarkashi by night. The special effect seen in the pic is due to the use of a filter mounted on the camera lens. In the backdrop is Varnavat mountain.

On the south of Varnavat mountain is the Bal Kila mountain. It is claimed that the sons of Brahmaji performed austerities here. Nearby is the Nachiketa lake. Earlier, this area had thick forests. Entire forests of Pine, Banj, Burans and other Himalayan vegetation have disappeared now. The Indrani river meets the Ganga here. There is a track from this valley to Kedarnath which is not in use now. But those travelling by cars and buses miss out on the real beauty of Himalaya. On the north side of Uttarkashi are Laksheshwar Mahadev and Daundi Taal where many wild animals of the Himalaya can still be seen. A river called Asi meets the Ganga soon after originating from Daundi Taal.

The Uttarkashi region is a very beautiful, peaceful and clean region, in the middle of the Himalaya. Many eminent rishis, philosophers, ascetics and exponents of *Brahma jnan* have lived here. The author's Guru, Swami Tapovanam Maharaj, also had a cottage here. He hailed from Kerala, and was an erudite and spiritually exalted person.



Alone amidst the crowd.



The hard life in the mountains leads to an old, weather-beaten look rather prematurely.



Poverty is one of the many faces of the mountains.

An unusual flower in Ganga valley.



A small barrage has been constructed over the Ganga at Maneri to provide electricity to Uttarkashi. Maneri is on the road to Gangotri. A little above it is a place called Malla. Here there is a rope bridge over the Ganga. On the other side of the Ganga in the northeast direction is the alpine meadow Kush Kalyan, and Sahasrataal. The route to Kush Kalyan and Sahasrataal is very beautiful. Climbing above it one can reach up to the famous Khatlinga glacier. Now only the local people and occasional trekkers take this route and there are few pilgrims and sadhus to be seen travelling on this path.

Travelling by metalled road from Malla one reaches Gangnani, which is not a very attractive place by itself, but is popular because of a hot water spring. It is not a very cold place. Buses carrying tourists stop here for a short while. It is said that rishi Parashar had performed austerities at Gangnani. In 1978 there was a massive landslide here which blocked the Ganga for over 14 hours. When the





Late Shri Rajiv Gandhi, former Prime Minister of India with his wife, Sonia, at a meeting in Garhwal. The Uttar Pradesh government set up the Garhwal Development Authority at his behest.

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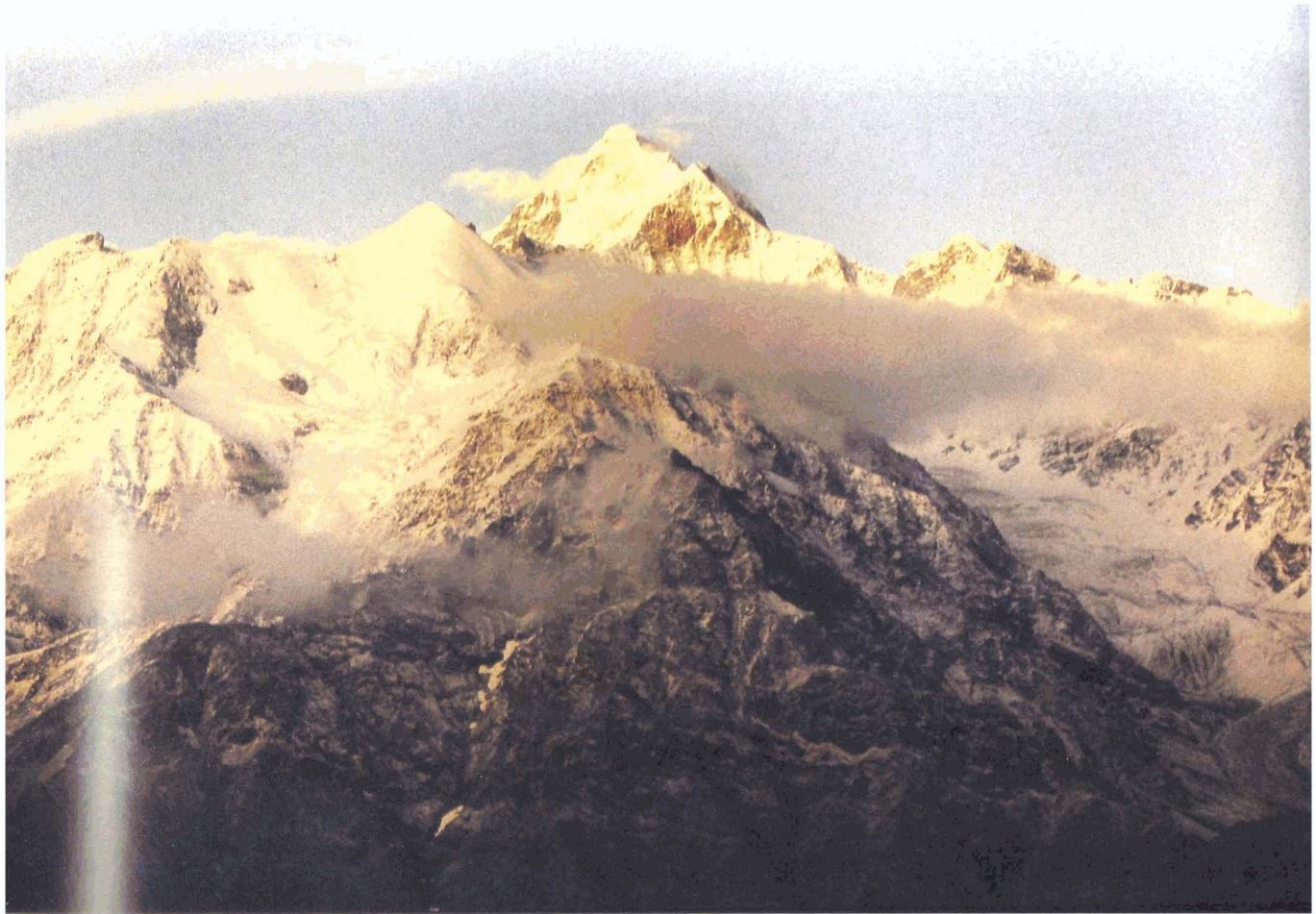
Late Smt. Indira Gandhi, former Prime Minister of India at Uttarkashi in 1984 – shortly before her assassination. She loved the mountains and protection of the Himalayan ecoregions was one of her important concerns.

The majestic mount Bhagirath-3 peak (approx. 23,000 ft.) It has been scaled by several mountaineers.

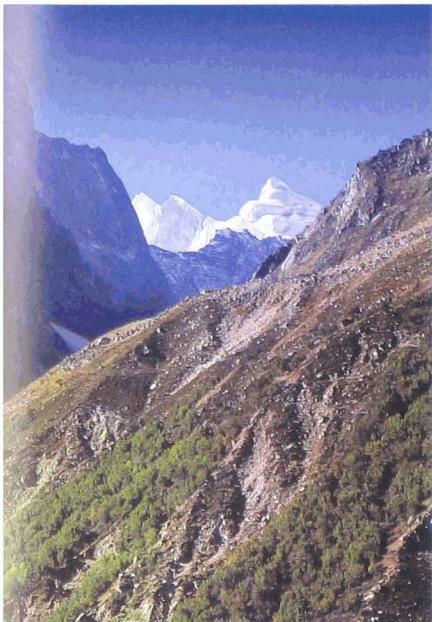




Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee touring Uttarkashi in 1985.

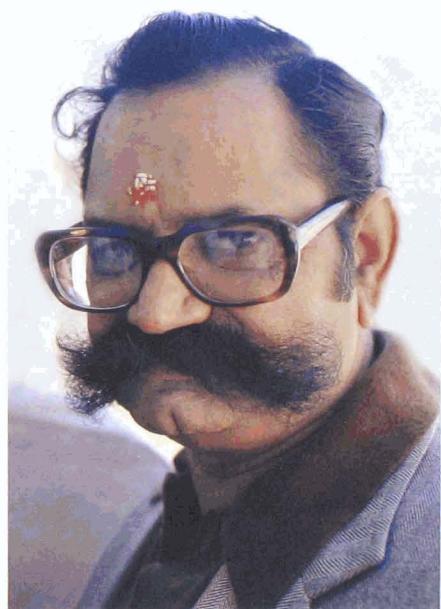


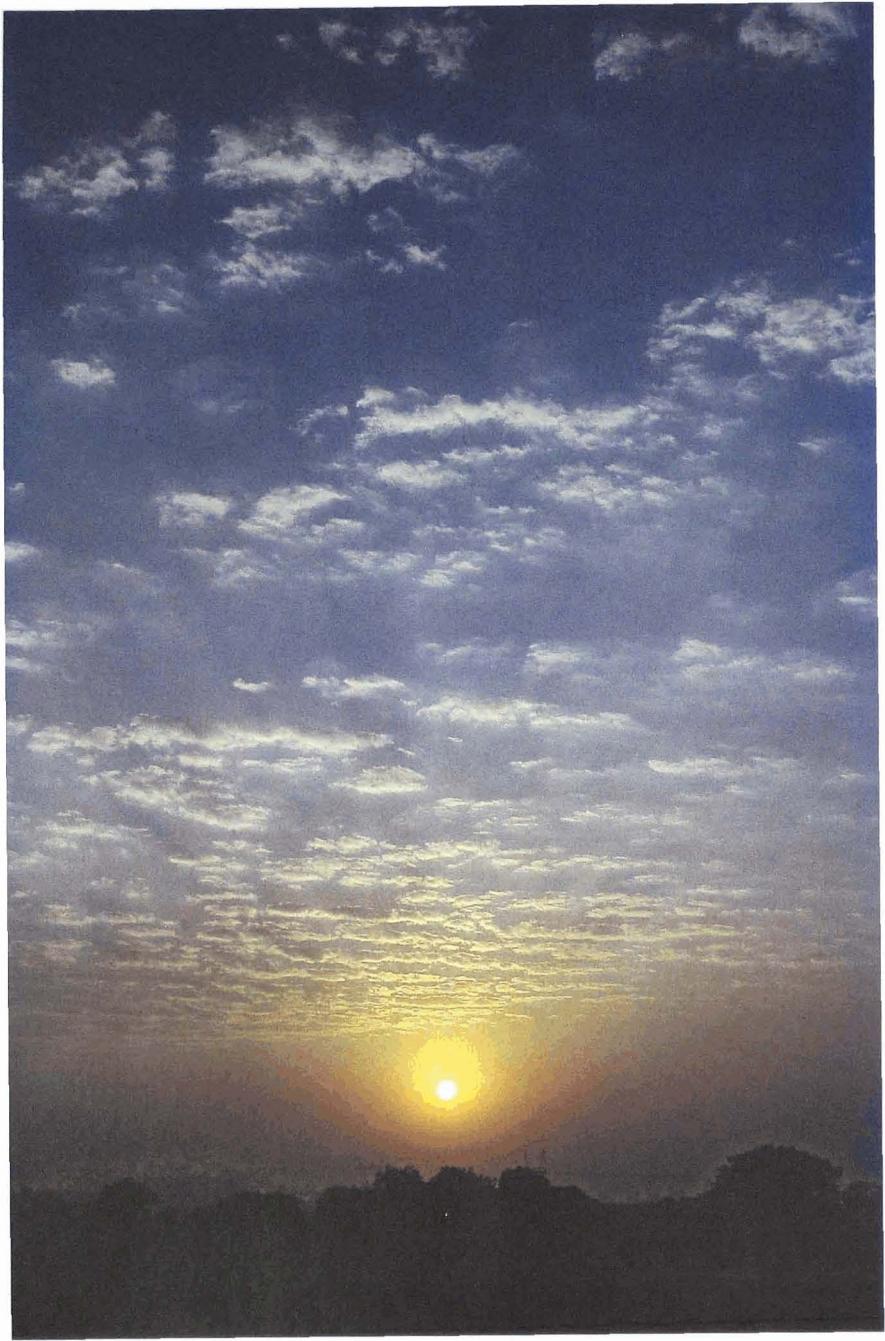
Mountain peaks viewed from Khatling glacier.



Mount Meru (ht 22,000 ft).
In the foreground is Matri
valley.

Shri Shivkumar sporting
an impressive moustache.
He has been a part of
Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee's
entourage for several decades.





Sunrise in Harsil valley infuses the sky with a kaleidoscope of colours.

a high pass in the west takes you to Himachal Pradesh while another pass takes you to Tibet. Sukhi Top, Harsil valley and the neighbouring mountains are rich in pine and fir forests. Snow bears have been sighted in the areas above the passes and below the glaciers. Musk deer and barral (mountain goat) are also found here.

Harsil is situated on the west bank of the Ganga and lately its population has increased many times. Above Harsil, there is the village of Bhagori whose people once traded with Tibet. They are prosperous people. Two rivers, Shyam and

impounded waters of the Ganga broke through this barrier, there was a heavy flood downstream which took a large toll of life and property. There was great damage to the region in 1991 also after a massive earthquake. Such natural disasters are common in the Himalaya.

Harsil

Harsil valley (8,400 ft) is a very cold place. The Border Security Force is now stationed here. Harsil receives heavy snowfall in winters and from September to March the entire area, including the adjoining mountains, remains covered with snow. The road to Harsil is also closed because of the heavy snow. There is a near-perpendicular climb to Sukhi Top on the way from Gangnani to Harsil. The road is like a snake's coil. After the great ascent, there is an equal distance of descent. From Sukhi Top the Ganga valley of Harsil is a fascinating sight. The long open plain at such a height surprises visitors. Because of the evenness of the area, the Ganga spreads out, but is nevertheless swift. One cannot cross the river because of its strong current. Apple, pear and apricot orchards are abundant here. Some people also rear sheep. One route from Harsil through



A woman from Harsil. Her nose ring made of gold, weighs over 50 grams. The traditional dress worn by women in Harsil is known as *gandeshi*.



A 1963 pic of the bungalow of Wilson, an Englishman who married a local girl and settled at Harsil. The bungalow was reduced to ashes in an accidental fire.

Contented with life, tattered clothes notwithstanding.



Jalandhari, meet the Ganga in Harsil. The popular belief is that due to the curse of a chaste woman, Vrinda, Lord Vishnu turned into a rock. That is why the name Harsil.

In the nineteenth century a British soldier by the name of Wilson took up residence here. He bought this area from the ruler of Tehri for a song and became rich by supplying sleepers for railways and timber for construction. He was de facto ruler of the area. He even introduced his own silver currency. A magnificent wooden palace belonging to him recently got burnt. Wilson married a local girl and had two sons from her. He also built a bungalow in Mussoorie. The cultivation of apples, potato and rajma beans was started by him.

There are many guest houses at Harsil for tourists. But nowadays, very few people visit Harsil although the view of the Himalaya, the Ganga and the forests from here is absolutely enchanting. It has a wealth of small rivulets, flowers, vines and forests in their full glory.

Dharali

On the old pedestrian route ahead of Harsil there are several rivulets and springs. After four kilometres one reaches Dharali, the last village before Gangotri. In ancient literature this place is referred to as Kalpa Kedar. Once there were over 120 temples here. They all vanished after an earthquake and consequent landslides. The spire of one such temple has become visible due to force of the Ganga waters which have carried away the rubble. This temple had a Shivlinga which however is still immersed in water. The stone architecture of the spire is



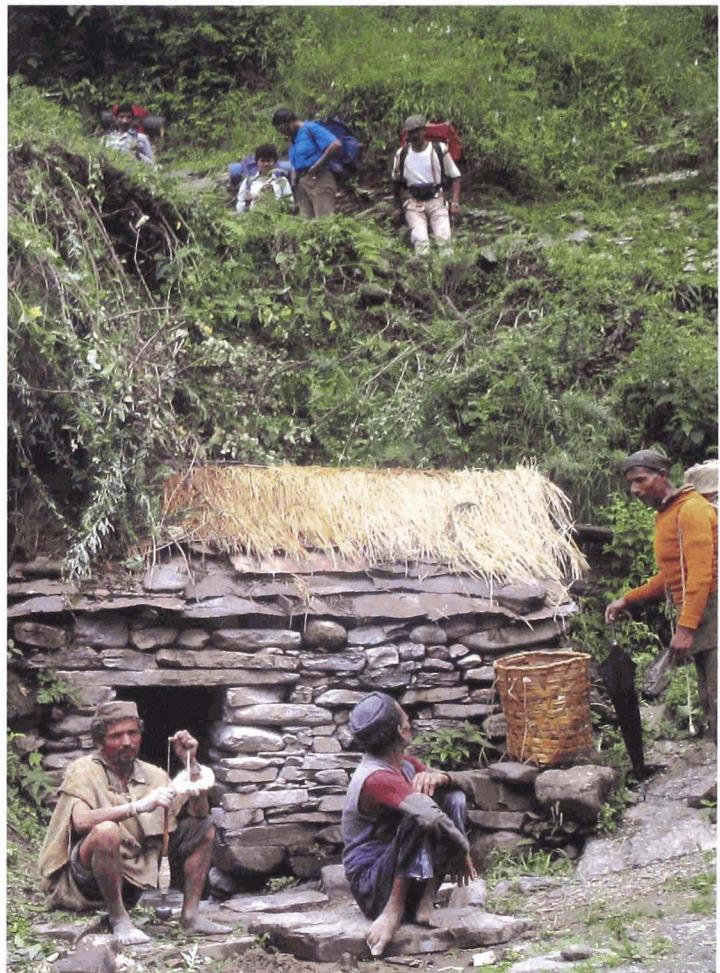
Tree trunks on the way from Bhatwari to Sahasrataal fulfil twin roles. They form a work of art and serve as a resting place for weary travellers.

beautiful. The size and height of the temple can only be imagined. Before the advent of roads, Dharali was a mere chatti on the pedestrian track. There was a very beautiful wooden dharamshala here built in the form of a fort by the ruler of Jaipur but it got destroyed recently in an accidental fire. It was so built that the inner portion became virtually air-conditioned and, during the severest winter, cold could not pierce through.

There were seven lakes in the forest above Dharali. These have all dried up due to indiscriminate cutting of the trees. Illegal tree cutting is the handiwork of a mafia here, as a result of which the flora, fauna and medicinal herbs in the region have disappeared. Dharali deserves to be developed again.

Above the lakes of Kalpa Kedar, there is the magnificent Shrikanth peak. According to the Puranas, the adjoining beautiful peaks and valleys go by the name of Mala, Awana, Dokrani, Draupadi Danda, Pandav Sera, Ramneek Dweep etc. These can be reached only by daring tourists or trained climbers. Attempting to reach these peaks without the help of coolies and a guide would be an invitation to disaster. But if one does take up the challenge, and reaches there, one's fatigue will vanish at the breathtaking sight. The place is so beautiful that it can only be

Villagers waiting for their turn to grind grain at a watermill. Such watermills, powered by small streams, specially channelled for the purpose, are a familiar site in mountain villages.





Haar Doodh Selku festival in Makwa village. The courtyard of the temple is decorated with flowers, and milk & curd are offered to the village deity Someshwar. As part of the festivities villagers perform Pandava and Draupadi dances.

Saalam Panja. The root of this rare medicinal plant has a striking shape with several joints.



termed heaven. The coolies and guides of the area harass the tourist a lot because their aim is not to escort one to the destination, but to fleece one. They threaten to leave one midway, and at times actually run away. It is perilous to be stranded high-up in the hostile mountains.

Across the Ganga, on the western slope of the mountain is a famous village called Makwa. It has been mentioned in the Puranas as the sacred grove of rishi Matang. It occupies a unique position geographically and enjoys sunlight from morning till evening while the adjoining areas receive the sun barely for two to three hours. The priests of Gangotri have made their residence in Makwa. When the Gangotri temple is closed for winter, its idol and ornaments are kept in safe custody in a temple in Makwa. Some years ago, the valuable ornaments were stolen. There are many caves around in which ascetics have performed austerities. Unfortunately, this mountain has become totally devoid of vegetation. Still the place has its many advantages.

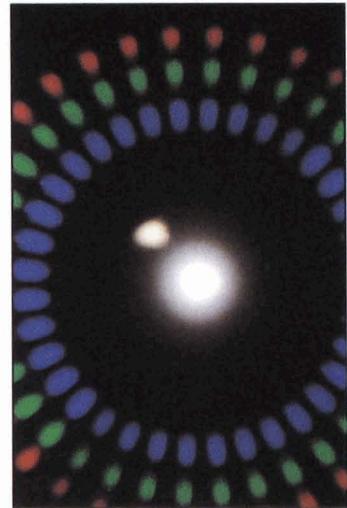
There is a spring here called Bhim Gattu from where the village takes its water supply. After crossing the rivulet formed by the spring, there is an extremely narrow passage through the mountain. Wilson's wife belonged to Makwa and her ancestral house still exists. The houses in the village are built of wood and some of them have even four-storeys. Their wooden architecture is of high quality and

has withstood earthquakes for more than 150 years. Our structural engineers should be shown these houses to learn how earthquake-resistant houses are made with local material and indigenous technology.

Markandeya rishi is said to have performed austerities in the nearby Markandeya village. Here also are a few caves for secluded meditation of ascetics. After the village there is a rivulet Gum-gum which flows from Tibet. In the Kedar Khand Purana it is referred to as Kum-kum. The rivulet flows very deep into a narrow valley making a sharp sound of gum-gum. As one moves ahead, there is a rope bridge across the Ganga, by crossing which one again reaches the main road on the eastern bank of Dharali.

After climbing another four kms one reaches a glacier which descends from the Shrikanth peak. The snow of this glacier slides every year through the forest and blocks the road near Dharali. The summer route to Gangotri is opened only after removing the snow and debris of trees and rocks on this road. In some years this snow is so thick that it forms a bridge over the Ganga. This offers a unique sight. Because of the slide of the glacier through the forest, many trees, rocks, stones and earth are carried down into the river. The forest above Dharali boasts of brown bear, musk deer and snow deer. Several medicinal herbs also grow here. On the higher reaches grows the forest of birch (Bhoj) trees. At this height one can hear an amazing echo coming from the mountains and the Ganga valley looks heavenly.

In olden times there was another resting place above Dharali which is known as Jangla. Till 50 years ago there was a very beautiful wooden rest house which



A bright star close to the full moon –
a rare shot through a special filter.

These four-storeyed pine wood houses
in Makwa village have withstood
earthquakes for more than 150 years.

The wood carvings on these houses
bear testimony to the highly developed
aesthetic sensibilities and technical skills
of the local populace.



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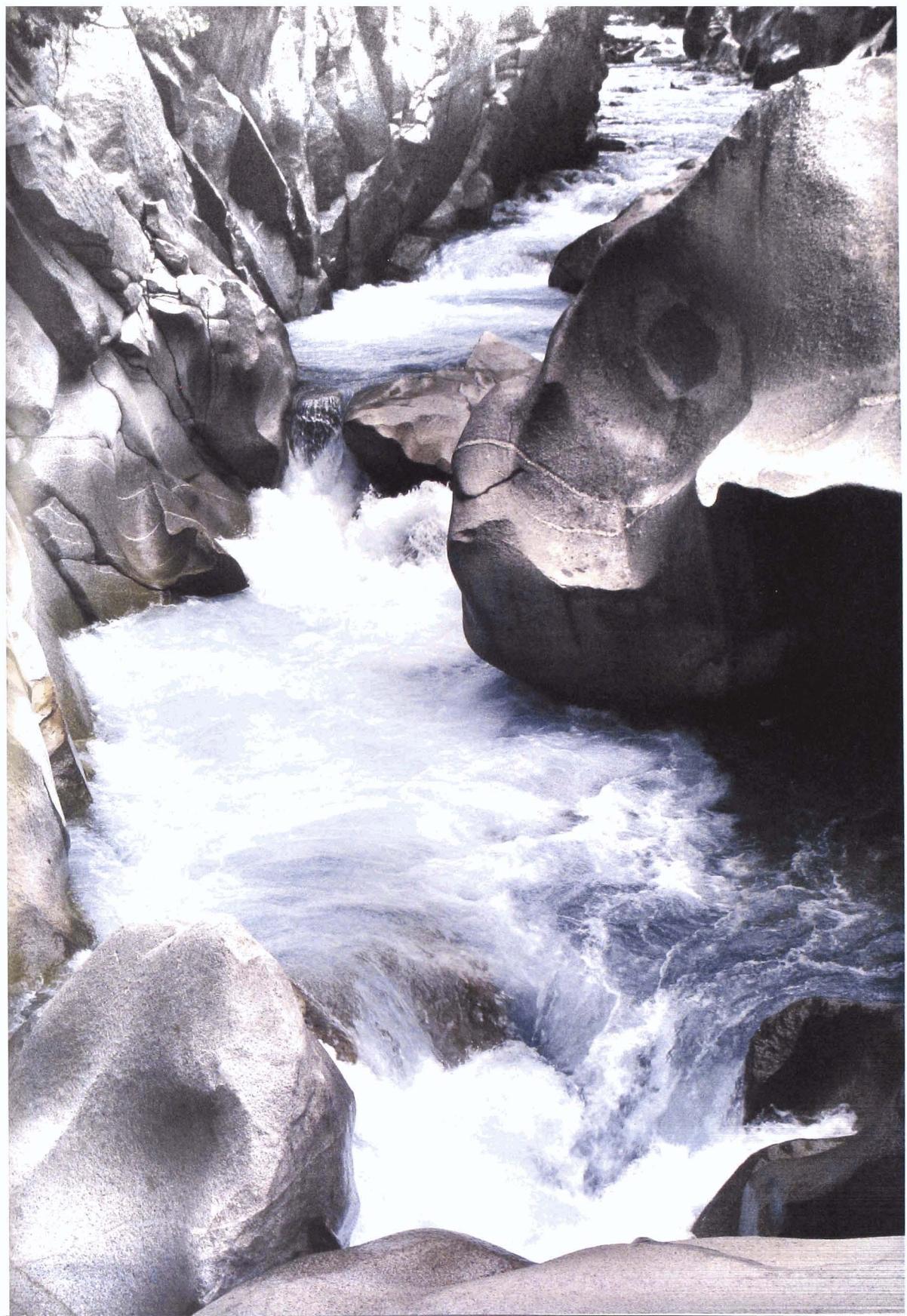
Rocks sculpted by the constant flow of the river Jahnavi, whose origin is in Tibet.

The confluence of Jahnavi and Bhagirathi at Lanka on the Gangotri route. The Ganga is muddy white and Jahnavi is sea green. According to Kedar Puran, Ganga had swept away the hut of sage Jahnu. Enraged, the sage drank up the entire Ganga. At the request of King Bhagirath, the sage relented and let the river resume its flow. That is why Ganga is also known as Jahnavi.

also alas, got burnt to ashes. On crossing the road bridge across Ganga one reaches the slopes on the western bank. There is no way ahead along the eastern bank. From here one can view the exquisite sight of the range of Bhrigupanth mountain and its peaks. To travellers it appears that the Ganga must have originated from those peaks.

After Jangla, there is the old resting place of Kupang. The army has now set up its camp here. In the days of foot-pilgrimage, groups of pilgrims, sadhus and porters used to rest here. A spring still exists but a very thick fir forest has now all but disappeared due to wanton felling of trees. A famous rejuvenating medicinal herb called Punarnava is found here in abundance. After Kupang there is a place called Lanka which is very difficult to reach. Before the advent of roads, this climb was a big challenge to pilgrims. After a descent of about one and a half kilometres from Lanka, one reaches the confluence of Jahnavi (also known as Jad Ganga) and Ganga rivers. Close to the confluence, the mighty rivers have cut the rocks in shapes which are very artistic and attractive. The present bridge over Jad Ganga was built in 1984 by Railway engineers. Before that there was a rope bridge whose remnants can be seen even today. Travelling through the valley of Jad Ganga and crossing the Pulam Sung pass on the India-Tibet border, one can reach Kailash-Mansarovar. This was once an active route. Traders in wool and other commodities used this pass. The old bridge on the now abandoned pedestrian route was several thousand feet below the present bridge. To reach the next place – Bhairon Ghati, one had to undertake a tough descent of one

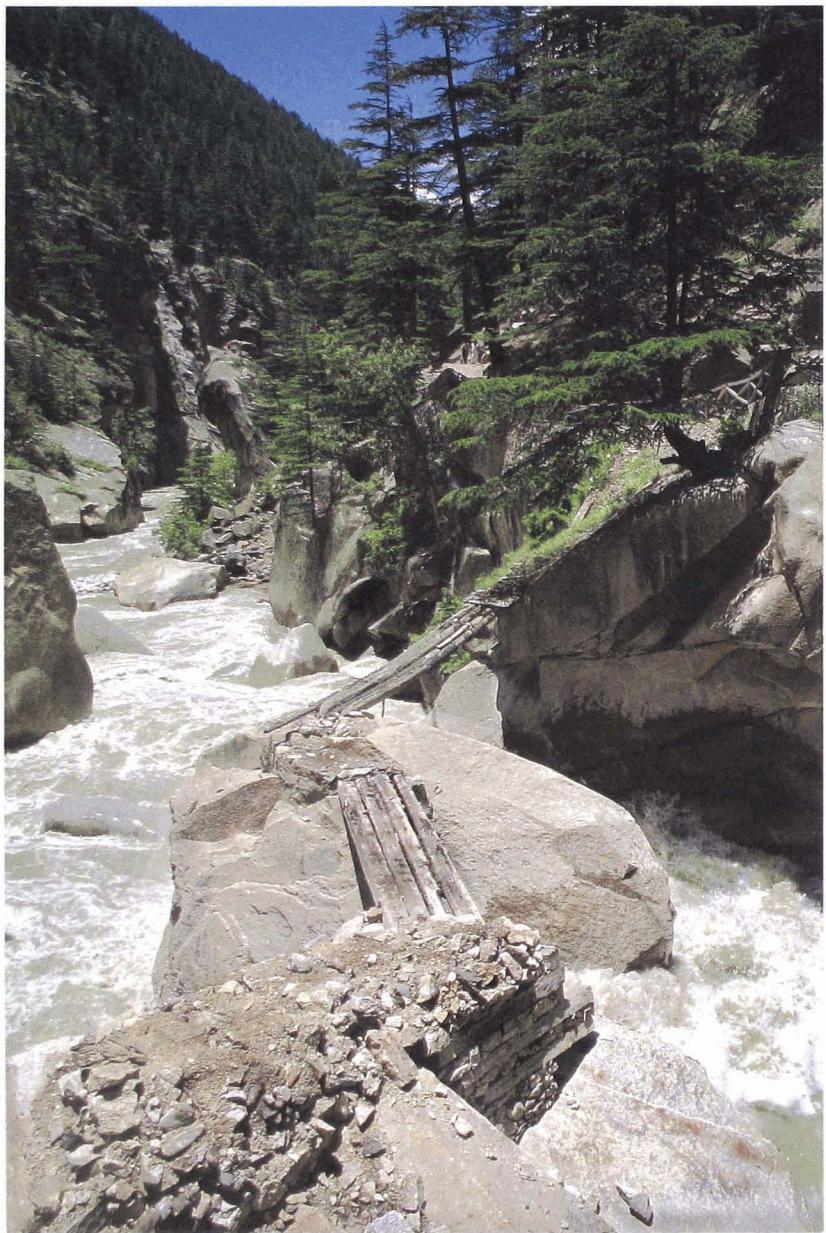




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Construction of new bridge (1984) over Jahnavi (Jad Ganga) on the way from Lanka to Bhairon Ghati. This bridge is so high that looking down at the river makes one dizzy. There was a route to Kailash-Mansarovar and other places in Tibet passing through the Jad Ganga valley, but it is now closed.

Old disused bridge across Jahnavi river at Bhairon Ghati.

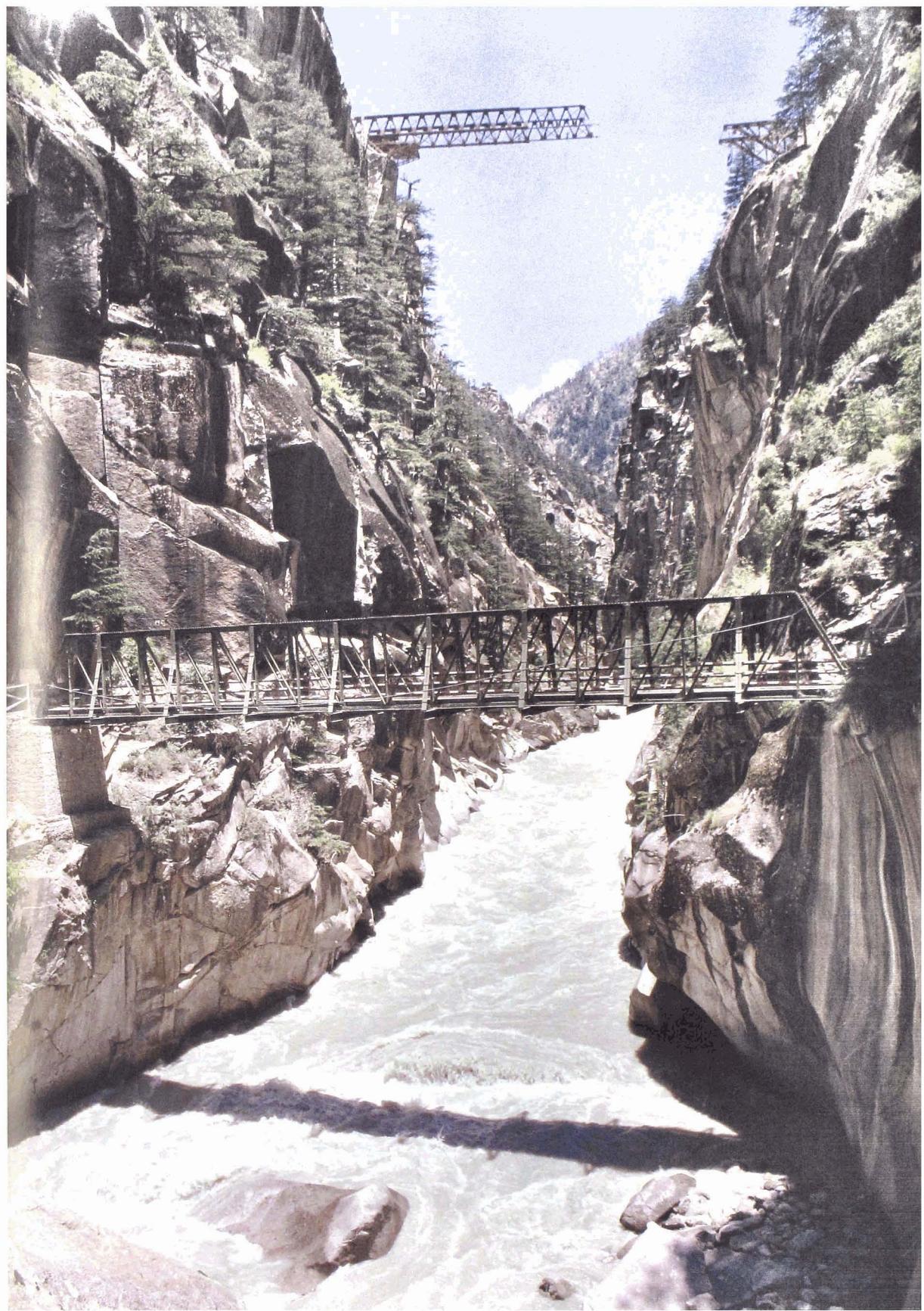


kilometre and then an equally tough climb ahead. The journey is still very rewarding.

There is the Neelang mountain range above Jad Ganga. A rare fragrant tree, Padmaksh, was found here whose wood was even more valuable than sandalwood. Now there are no trees left as the entire forest has been gradually cut down and sold. About one and a half kilometres below Lanka, the valley of Jad Gang is very narrow, with the mountains on both sides standing erect. The old route from this valley was very narrow and dangerous. Viewing it from above, it seems that Jad river and the Ganga are flowing in some underworld. The earlier route had been hewn out of the mountain. Travellers had to regulate

their breath to climb up or down. There is a stream on this route whose bed is made up of red earth. As a result, the vegetation around has also turned red. In olden times, people used to sip this water as a gift of Bhaironji. The taste of the water is pungent but it has medicinal qualities. It kills parasites and purifies blood. Now you can reach this stream only with some effort.

There is an interesting story of an old woman who was once travelling alone with a small bundle on her head. She did not even have *chappals* on her feet. They must have broken or worn out during the hard climb. Her clothes were old and tattered. Considering the cold of these Himalayan heights, she was practically naked. She was poor in every way. She did not have money even for bus fare. On talking to her, the author discovered that she had been travelling from Rishikesh. For food she had with her parched grain. Despite her poverty and helpless state, she was not prepared to ask for anything from any other traveller. When the author asked her about her problems, she said, "Beta, Teerath yatra mein kaha nahin jata, saha jata hai." – "My son, when on a pilgrimage, one does not complain, one just bears up." Unfortunately, such faith is rare in present day pilgrims. ☺





Mala-Awana valley on the way to Dokrani glacier. This route tests the abilities of even the most intrepid trekkers.



A woman from Bagori, a remote Garhwal village, in traditional attire with typical ornaments worn in the mountains.

Wandering in Gangotri Area

The Gangotri area begins from Bhairon Ghati. Bhairon is said to be the guardian of Gangotri, and a small, ancient temple dedicated to him is located here. Offerings of jaggery and thick wheat bread which were later distributed as a blessing among travellers, sadhus and ascetics used to be made at Bhairon. The offerings were so bountiful, they took care of the meals of everybody around. Incense was burnt continuously in this temple. With the advent of bus travel, it is now lying in disuse and the practice of offerings at the temple has also ceased. There is an old guest house near the temple which is also hardly used.

There are now other guest houses in Bhairon valley belonging to the PWD, the Forest Department and the Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam. There is also a centre of the Border Roads Organization. Earlier there was such a thick forest of pine here that even sunlight could not penetrate through the canopy. Opposite Bhairon Ghati and across the Ganga there is the Shilajit mountain. The monkeys here eat shilajit along with fruits.

While leaving Bhairon Ghati for Gangotri, travellers are blessed with glimpses of the Bhrigupanth mountain range, Sudarshan peak, Matri peak and Cheedvasa peak. On the right side of the road are the Mainaki mountains and the Rudra mountains. In these mountain ranges there are trees called Venu, which are worshipped like the Peepal tree.

The areas below these mountain peaks become colourful during spring with a large variety of flowers. Spring is also the season when the young ones in the herds of snow deer can be seen frolicking in open spaces. But such scenes are denied to those travelling by buses and cars. They remain unaware of the real beauty of the Himalaya. Those who travel in a leisurely fashion on foot are able to imbibe the real essence of the Himalaya. When people who have been in communion with the true nature of the Himalaya return to their homes in the plains, they do not tire of relating the splendour of the mountains to their near and dear ones. On the other hand, the rich travellers who return from their bus or car journeys, keep complaining about the painful journey and lack of facilities.



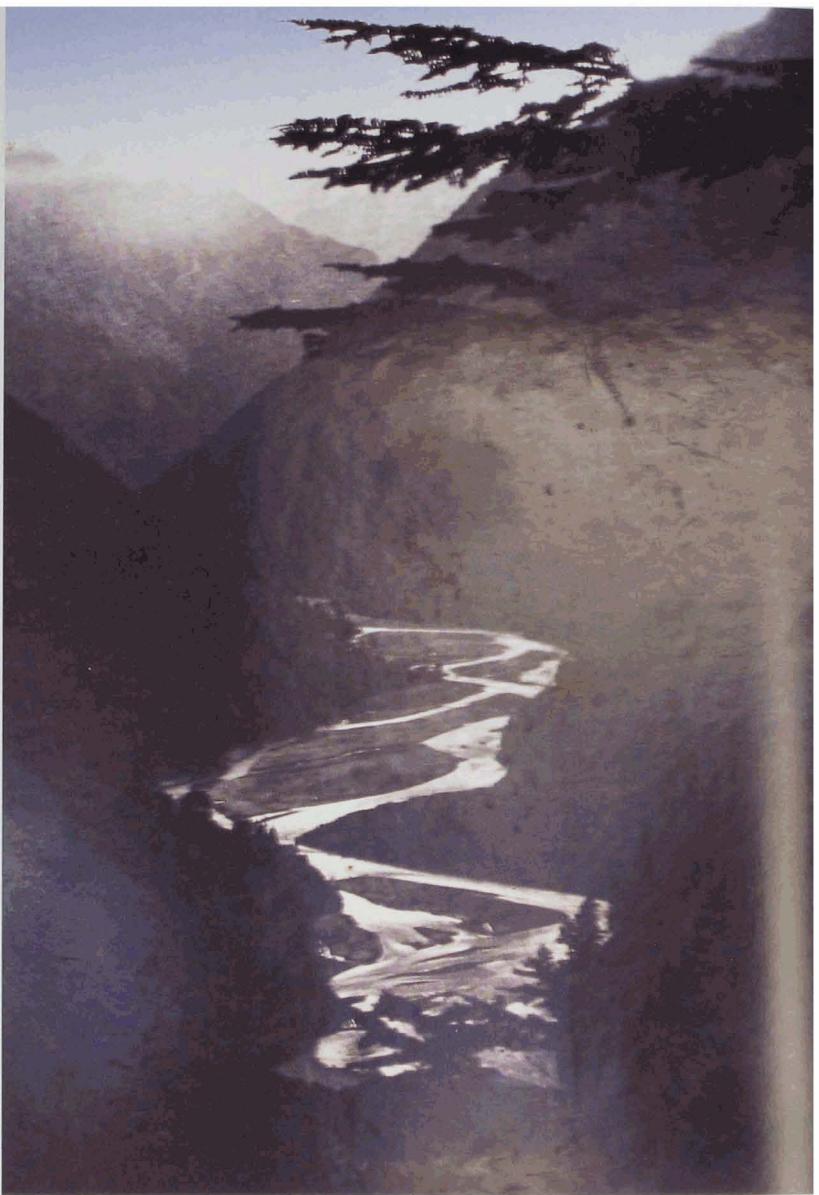
Gauri Kund at Gangotri in winter. Raja Bhagirath is said to have meditated here.

Ganga at Harsil, about 13 km downstream from Gangotri flowing in the form of Aum. The sages have called Ganga Omkar Swaroopini in the *Ganga Sahasranama*.

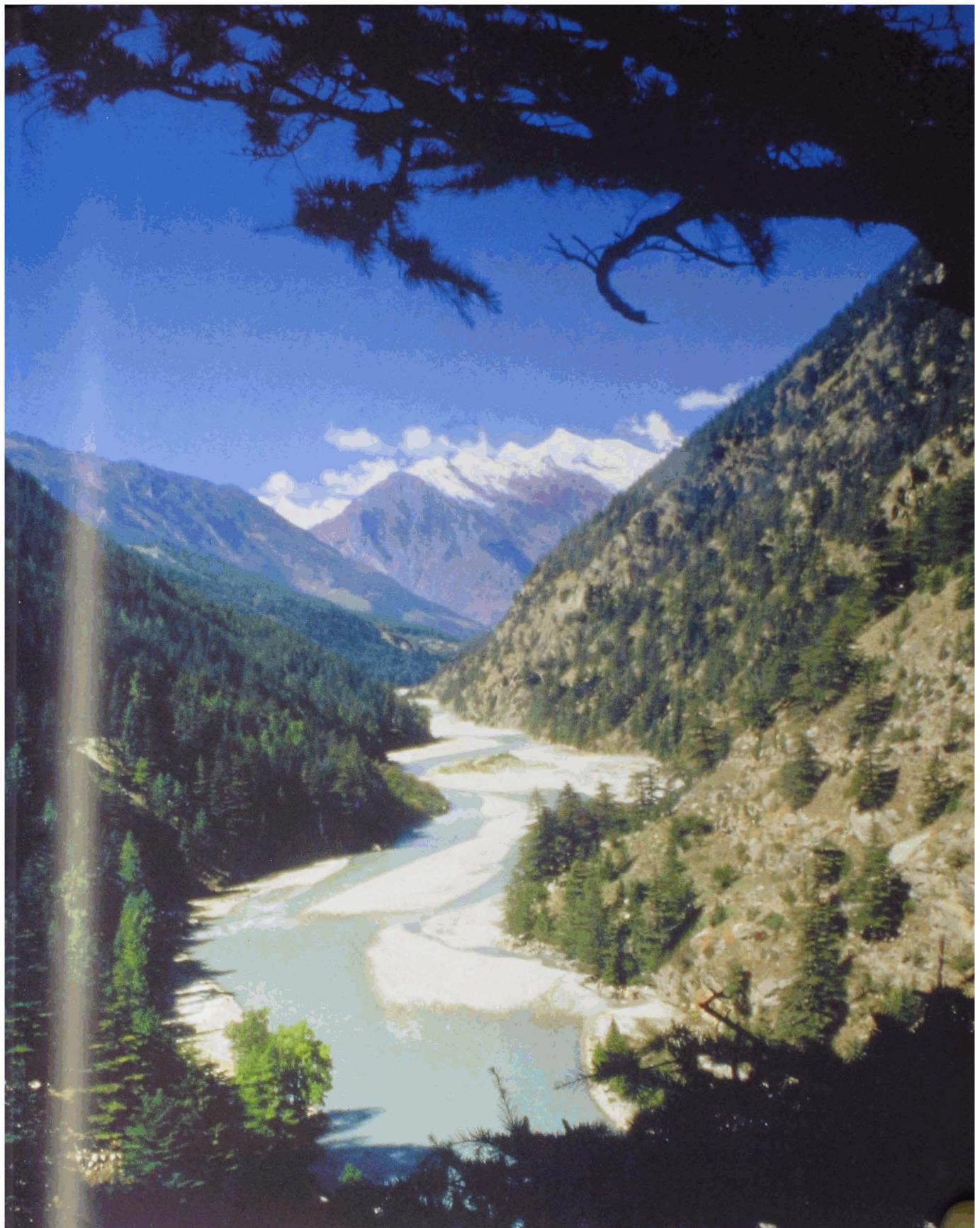
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Ganga generally flows eastwards. But here at Laldanga, above Dharali, it flows from east to west. Thick pine forests come right down to the river bank. In the west can be seen the Bandarpooch mountain range, behind which lies the source of the river Yamuna.

Lord Ganesha is rarely seen in ornate costumes or finery. But the Garha Ganesha at Jaipur, Rajasthan is different.



Flowing down from the southern direction the Rudra Ganga river meets the Ganga. Near the place of confluence is the Rudra cave which is worth seeing. Before roads were built there was a bridge over the Ganga here after crossing which one could reach the plain of Patangana and then Gangotri itself. Now, of course, that bridge is not in use. Patangana finds a mention in the Mahabharata. According to the Puranas, the Pandavas performed the Rudrabhishek yajna here and atoned for the killing of their clan in the Mahabharata war. To the south of the Patangana plain there is the Rudragairu peak and for reaching its valley one has to undertake an arduous climb through the vale of Rudra Ganga. To the south of the Rudragairu peak are the Gangotri peaks, and next to them is the Jugin mountain range.





The medicinally important Saalam flower.

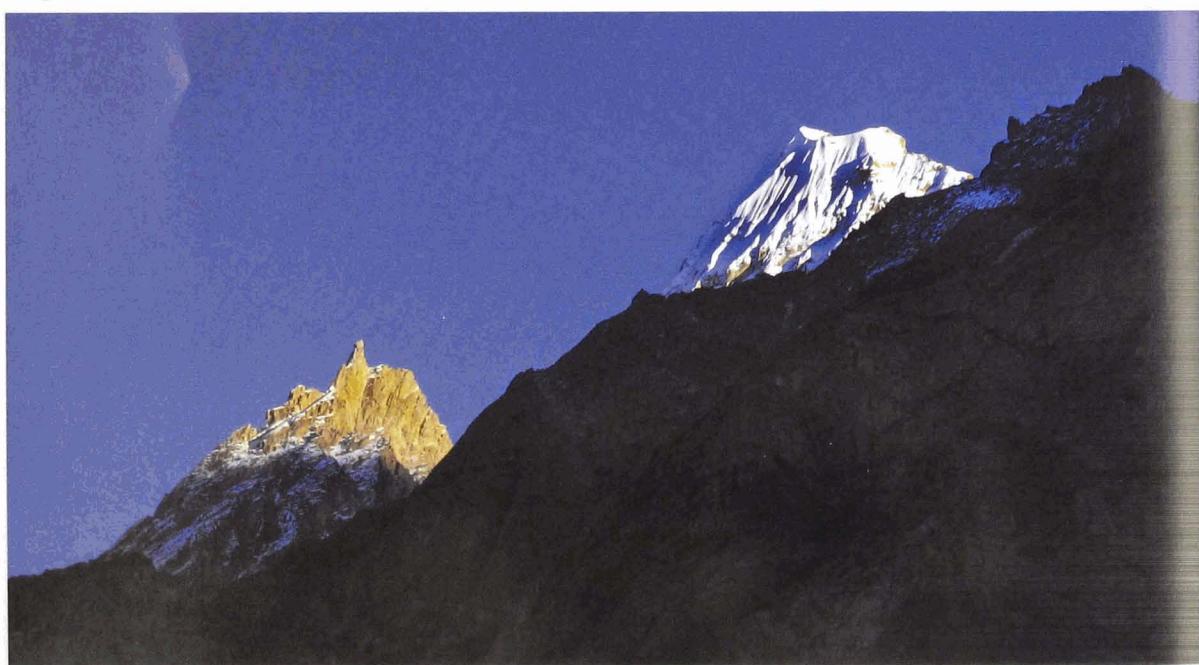
The Ganesha mountain (left) and Hanuman Tekri (right) just above Gangotri.

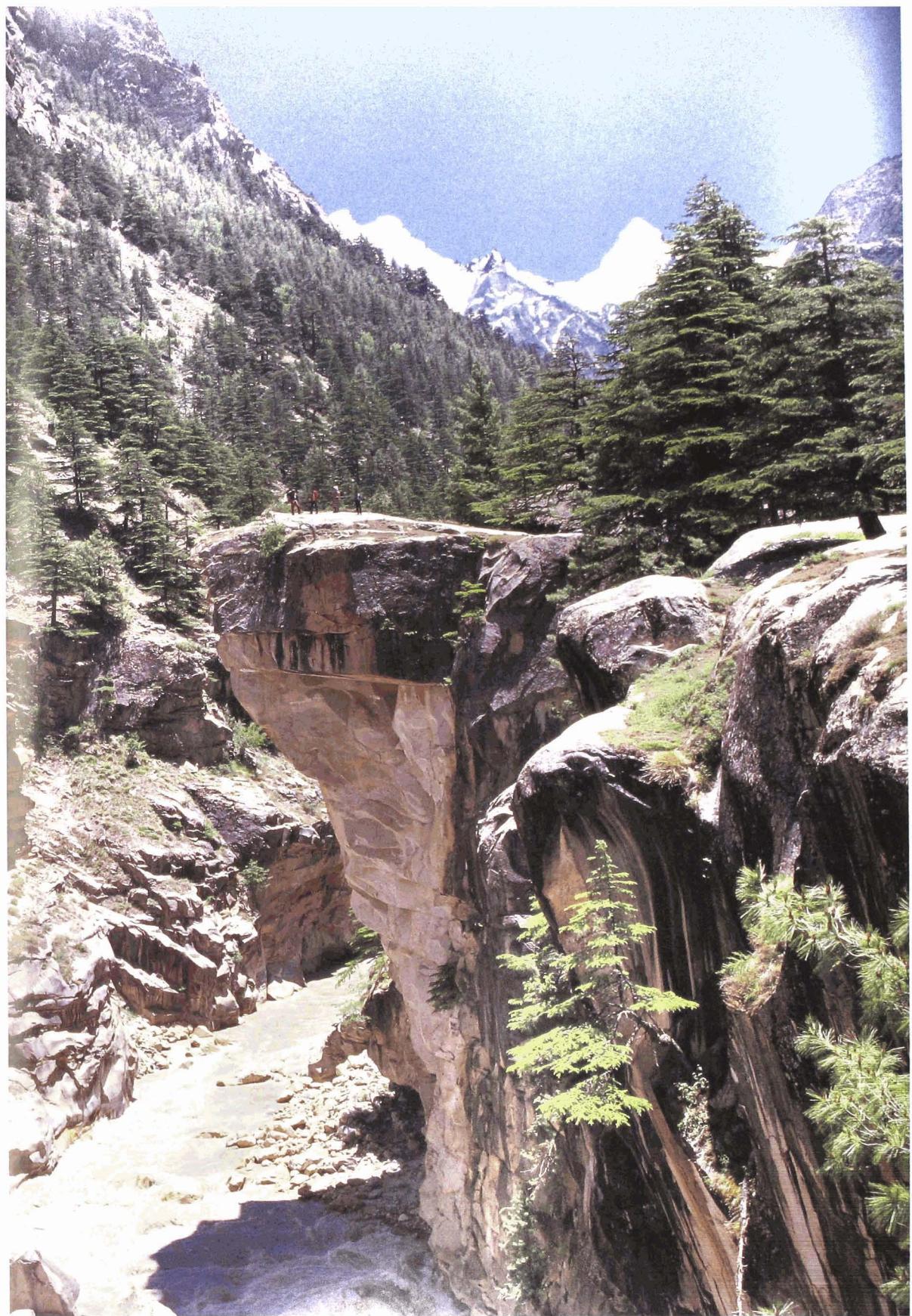
Patangana

Patangana is also known as the Pandavas region. It is evident from the marks of erosion made on rocks by the force of water that the Ganga must have been flowing through this region in the past. This area too was once thick with fir trees. Many of the old trees have been cut down. Now there grow several kinds of medicinal herbs. Jeevak and Rishvak, locally known as Pangri and Laatu, are the prominent herbs. The villagers of Himalaya traditionally used them as a condiment. Both herbs are, in Ayurvedic terms, of a hot nature and cure the disorders of *vaat* (wind) in the human body. The Laatu has almost disappeared now. Rishvak is also found among the birch trees in the high mountains. Papamor, an unusual fruit which is red in colour and has a sweet taste, also grows here. A kind of Jamun tree too is found here but its fruit has a big kernel and little pulp. The fruits of other trees like Kimli and Daruhaldi are the favourites of bears, and monkeys.

Above Patangana and before Gangotri the Ganga flows through a very deep and narrow gorge. This almost subterranean path lies between two massive rocks. It is a wonder how the entire water of such a strong and big river squeezes through this narrow gorge. With the constant force of water, these rocks have been hewed into shapes which people variously describe as a pond, conch shell, water bowl or snake. The Ganga here starts flowing northwards as if trying to anoint the forehead of Lord Shiva. Above this place is the large water basin called Gauri Kund formed by the breathtaking waterfall of the Ganga. This basin is also known as Surya Kund. It is believed that Raja Bhagirath performed austerities on a large rock here. The Puranas say he did penance for 5,500 years.

FACING PAGE: The Ganga has cut a ravine 150-200 ft deep here at Patangana, before Gangotri. At one time it must have been flowing above the rocks of Patangana as is evident from the marks of erosion.

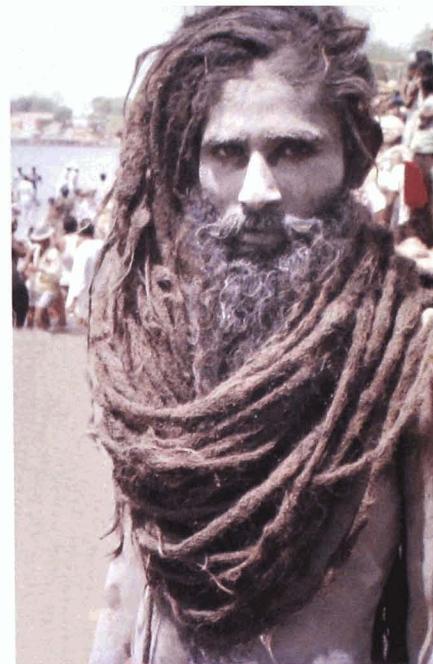






A Spectacular Waterfall

Gauri Kund is the only perennial waterfall in the entire journey of the Ganga, from its source at Gomukh to its merger at Gangasagar in the Bay of Bengal. The waterfall is 80 ft high. The play of sunlight on the water spray forms a rainbow which can be seen through the whole day. With the felling of adjoining trees, a landslide occurred here whose debris fell into the water basin. The state government has now built an embankment here, with steps for visitors to sit and enjoy the sight of the fall.



An ash-smeared sadhu of Naga sect, with striking matted tresses about 15 ft in length.

FACING PAGE:
Gauri Kund at Gangotri is the only place on the Ganga's entire journey where it 'falls' by 80 ft.

NEXT SPREAD:
Brighupanth peak bathed with the golden rays of sunset. Frequent snowslides occur below the peak with deafening sounds. The stunning beauty of various mountain ranges on the way to Gangotri holds travellers spellbound.

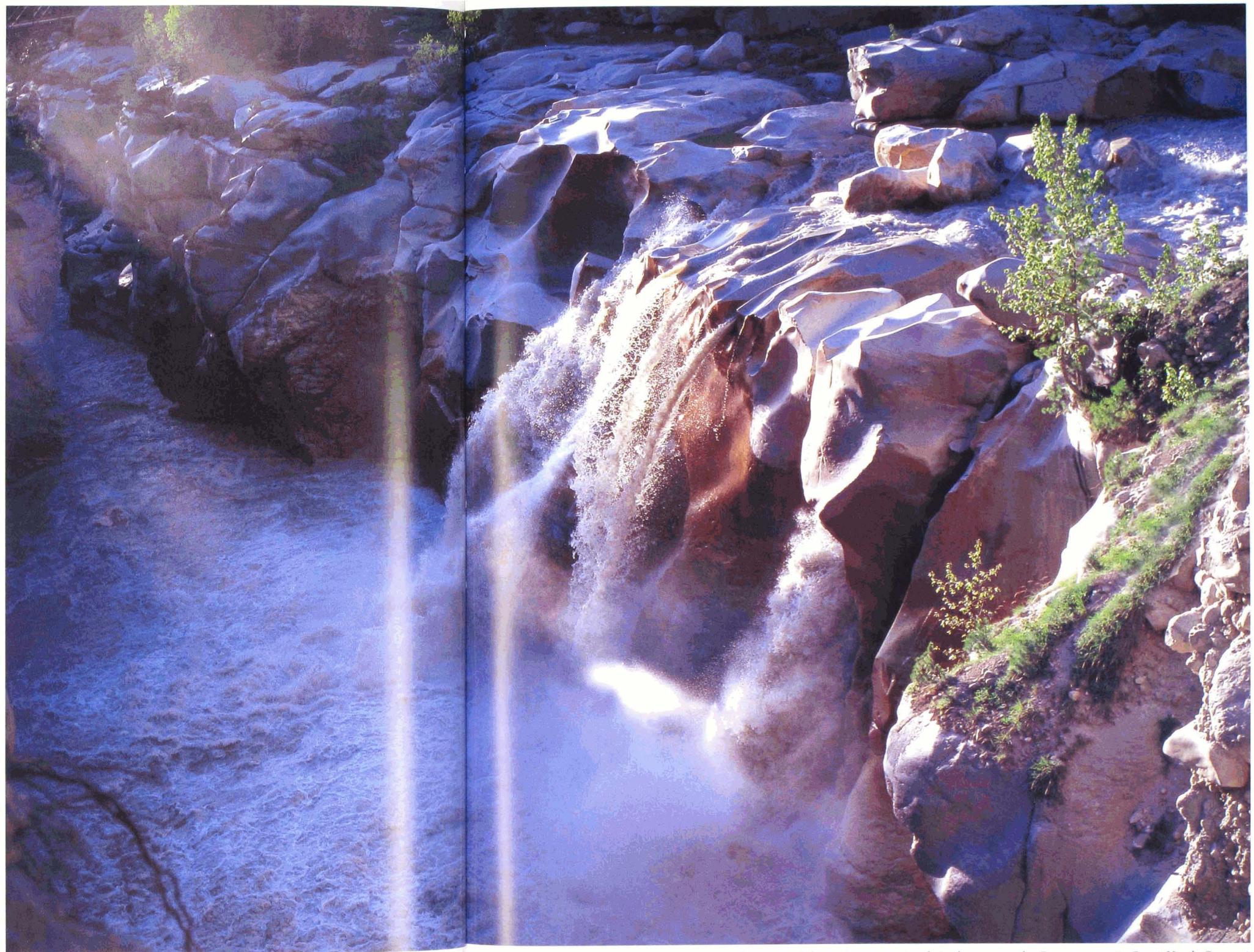
The mighty Ganga near Gauri Kund at Gangotri, as it squeezes through the narrowest gorge on its long journey from Gomukh to Gangasagar. The gorge is 200 ft deep but only about a few feet wide.



Mythological Significance

Gangotri used to boast of unmatched natural beauty. Gangotri attracted people even before the age of historical records, with ascetics performing austerities. Gangotri has received great praise in the mythological Puranas. Narad Muni, Swami Ram Tirtha, Guru Tapovanam Maharaj and many others have described the celestial beauty of this place. Actually, Gangotri was considered the real origin of the Ganga. There must have been a time when the Gangotri glacier extended down to Gangotri. It is for geoscientists to find out when the glacier receded. Gangotri is the confluence of the Ganga and Kedar Ganga. The latter flows from south to north to merge in the main river, and great religious significance is attached to this place.

At Gangotri today, situated as it is at 10,300 ft above sea level, the climate is cold even in summer. It is very pleasant while the sun is shining, but the temperature plummets once the sun is obscured. Till fifty years ago, there were thick forests at Gangotri. There was a wide variety of flora and fauna and musk deer were prominent. There used to be heavy snowfall during winters. Small groups of pilgrims arrived in summer and there were no crowds. There was the temple, one dharamshala for pilgrims and a temporary residence for the priests. Some coolies and other labourers also came. Along a long stretch there were caves used by sadhus and ascetics. There existed only four huts made of wood. With the beginning of winter the priests and other local people left for their homes at lower elevations. Only four or five sadhus remained in winter. They lived alone in their caves and occasionally went to meet one another. In summers, even during the pilgrimage season, the number of residents used to remain between 100 and 150. During the entire summer season, barely five to six thousand pilgrims would arrive, travelling on foot. They rested here for one or two days, and brought their food and other essentials with them. The arrival and departure of this small number did not adversely affect the environment of Gangotri. Today things are very different.



Last rays of the setting sun paying their obeisance to the Ganga waters in Gauri Kund, Gangotri.



A wild Himalayan flower and buds bathed in dew drops.

Gangotri's Ganga temple was built by Sawai Madho Singhji, the king of Jaipur, about 70 years ago. Now pandas have built their houses around it (pic 1952).

Gangotri Temple

A small temple was first built here during the Gorkha rule in Garhwal. The present temple was built 70 years ago by the ruler of Jaipur. It lies to the northwest in Bhairon Jhamp mountain valley. This is an ideal place for the temple because the Ganga here flows almost in a plain field. Because of boulders in the way, it keeps changing its course. In recent years it has started flowing closer to the temple.

To the south of Gangotri is the Hemkund mountain range. Its peaks find a mention in ancient legends. The way to the valleys of these peaks is so dangerous that the climb can put one's life in peril. There are easier routes to all these valleys from Gangotri. The venerable Gurudev Swami Tapovanam Maharaj first arrived at Gangotri in 1918. He lived and meditated at both Gangotri and Uttarkashi. He travelled to many inaccessible valleys in Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh and Kailash-Mansarovar several times. This was his way of worshipping God. Based on his experiences during these travels, he wrote several books, prominent among them being 'Ishwar Darshanam' and 'Wandering in the Himalaya'. He has described in detail the Himalayan valleys, rivers, lakes, peaks, animals and the vegetation found at different places. His account has been the inspiration and guidance for this author.

The way to the south of Gangotri peaks lies along the right bank of Kedar Ganga. When they move ahead on this route, climbers find the Patangani Dhar





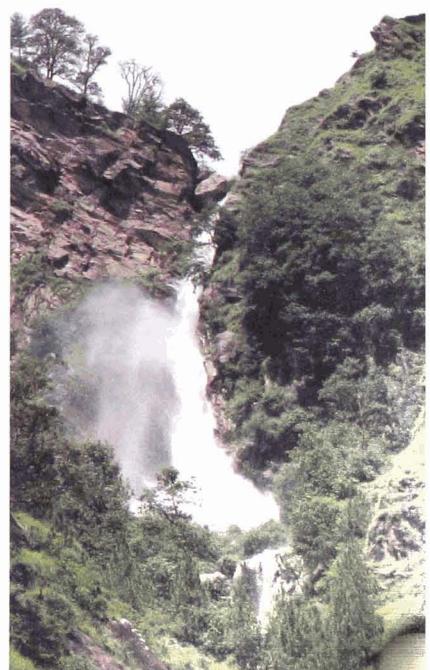
Sunset in the upper Himalaya.

mountain on their right. As they climb on, these ranges assume a huge shape almost touching the sky. This mountain stands like a wall between the valley of Kedar Ganga and the valley of Rudra Ganga. Further up, the Patangani Dhar merges into the Jigin peak. On the right of Jigin peak are the peaks Gangotri-1, Gangotri-2 and Gangotri-3. And on the right of these there is the Rudragairu peak. On the left of Jigin peak too are several grand peaks. The first is the Thalaisagar peak. On its left is Bhrigu peak and further left are the ranges of Bhrigupanth mountains.

Travelling south from Kedar valley, and crossing over the Patangani Dhar range, one can reach the Rudragairu valley. From the ridge of Patangani Dhar a magnificent view is obtained of the valleys on both sides. Thalaisagar peak appears from here as if Lord Ganesha is seated in meditation. Climbing expeditions use Kedar Taal and even Kedar glacier as a base camp for attempts on Jigin peak. In the past 30 years many expeditions have successfully climbed these peaks. All these climbers have left heaps of garbage at the base camps. It should be their duty to dig pits and bury such garbage. It is unfortunate that they shun this responsibility. The best course would be to bring down the entire load of this garbage because it does not decay at heights of 18,000 ft.

Between the Thalaisagar and Jigin mountain peaks there is a pass which is perennially covered with snow. Across this pass is the Khatling glacier beyond which is the Kedarnath Dham. No one has ever gone to Kedar Dham by this route. The author has successfully climbed Gangotri-2 and Gangotri-3 from Rudragairu valley. Gangotri-2 is over 22,000 ft. With the help of binoculars one can view from this peak the vastness of the Himalaya and even the remote

A seasonal waterfall on the Bhatwari-Gangotri road. The 600 ft high waterfall forms only in the monsoon.

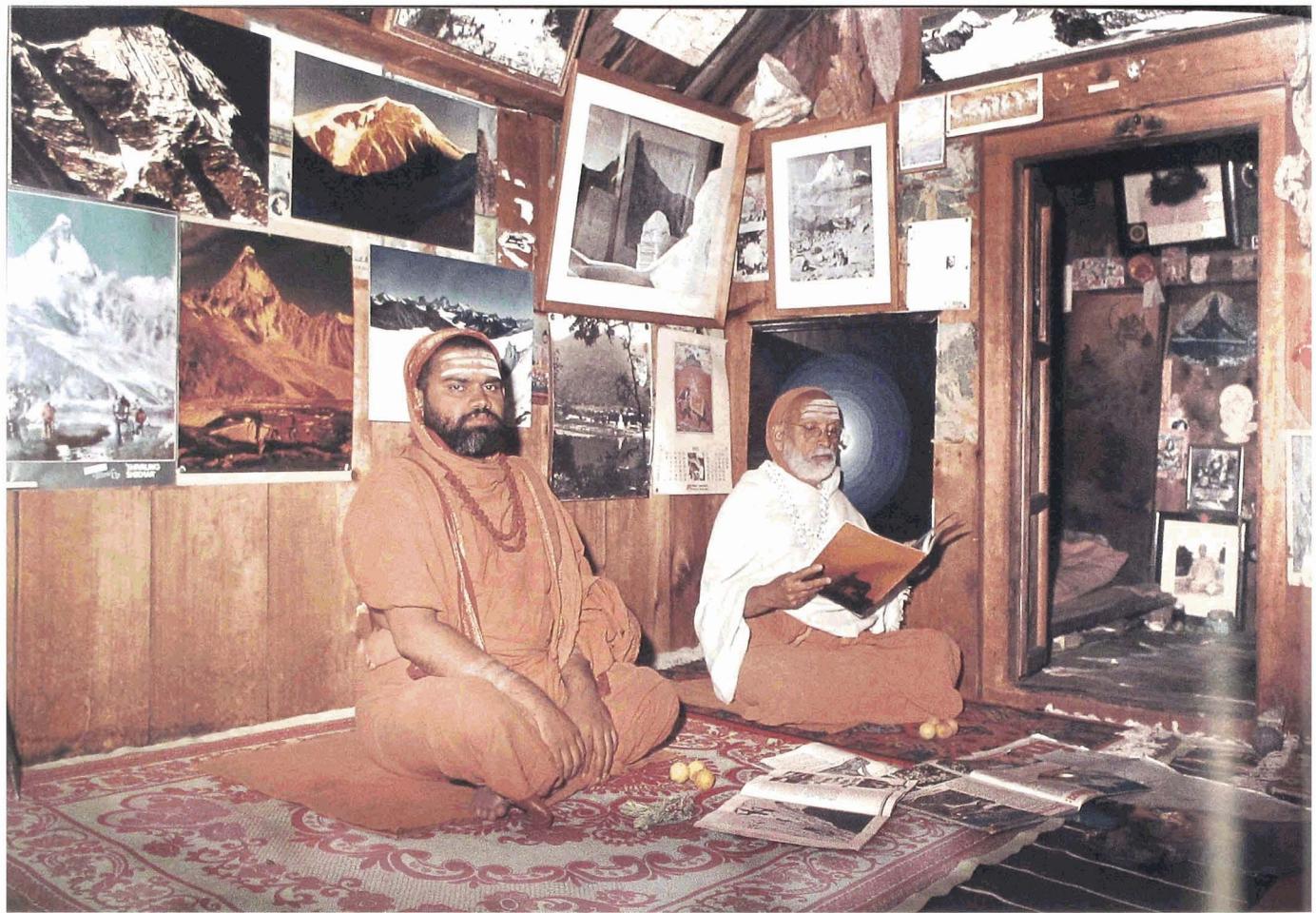






A self-statue of the Ganga. Nobody knows how long its soft water took to carve this form on the hard rocks near Gauri Kund.

FACING PAGE: A play of light with the mist forms a rainbow as the Ganga falls in Gauri Kund.



The Shankaracharyas of
Shringeri Math visiting
Tapovan Kuti in 1984.



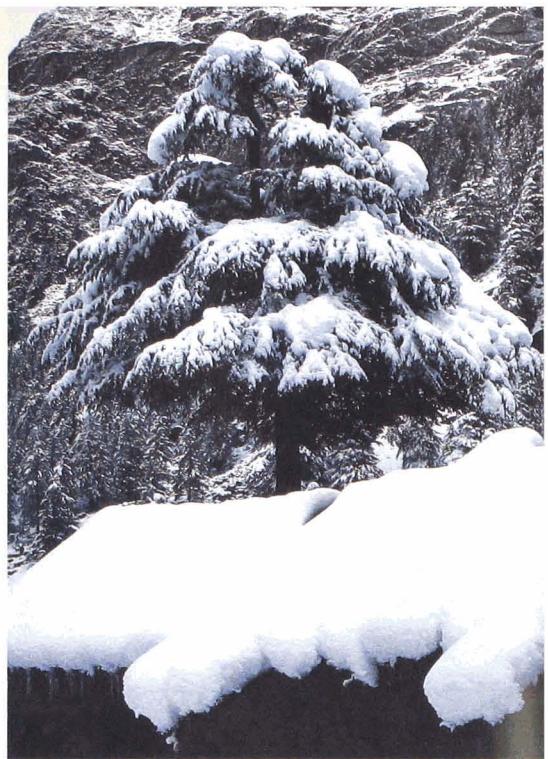
Ganga in winter at the
confluence of Kedar Ganga
and Bhagirathi Ganga.

FACING PAGE:
Tapovan kuti at Gauri Kund,
Gangotri was built in 1921.
The abode of Guru Tapovanam
Maharaj, it was bequeathed to
the author who continues
to live in the kuti.





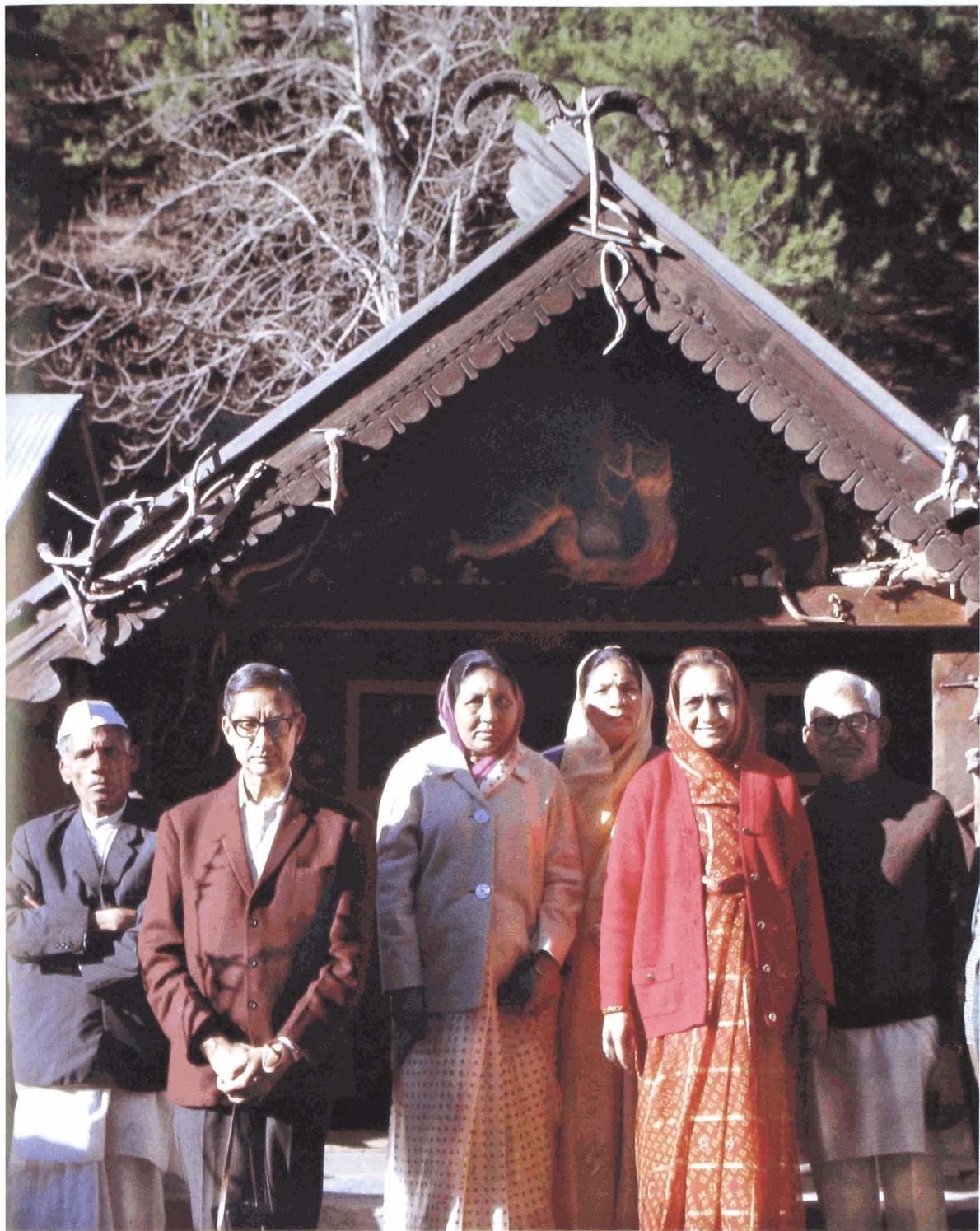
Nature worship.
An offering of
dew drops on a
naturally formed
Shivalinga with a
tripund (three
distinctive lines
symbolic of
Shiva) at
Tapovan kuti.



Trees at
Tapovan kuti
welcoming the
snow.

Last prayer – 'Aum' – of a dying leaf.





Shri Basant Kumar Birla and his wife Smt. Sarala Birla at Tapovan kuti which they visited on each of their eight trips to Gangotri (pic 1981).



A prominent bend on the Ganga is the landmark for Markandeya, the last village on the way to Gangotri. After the Gangotri temple is closed for winters, Saraswati worship is performed here and at Makwa village. Some old caves earlier used by itinerant sadhus can be found in this area.



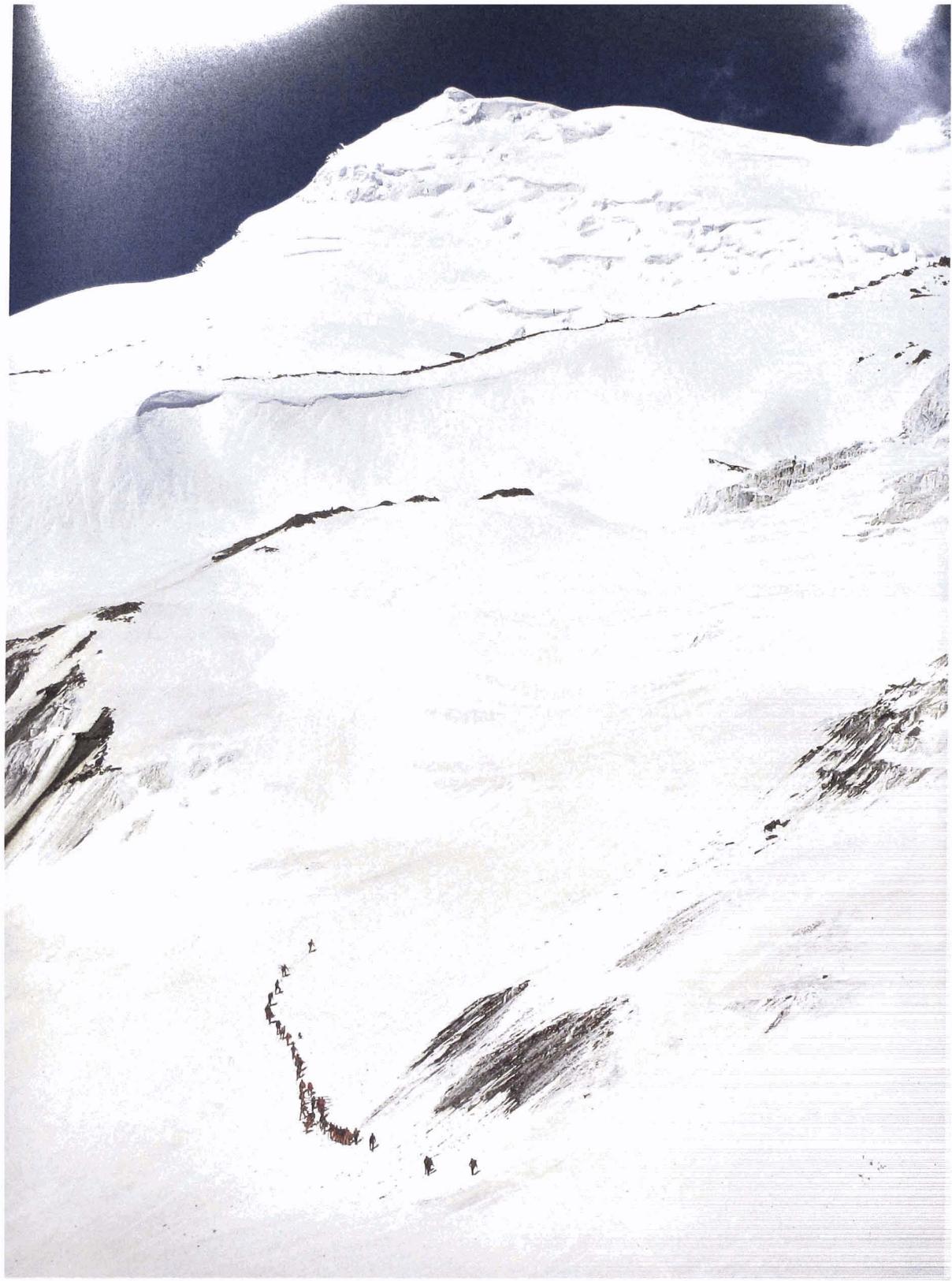
The chinar tree, synonymous with Kashmir can also be found at Gangotri.



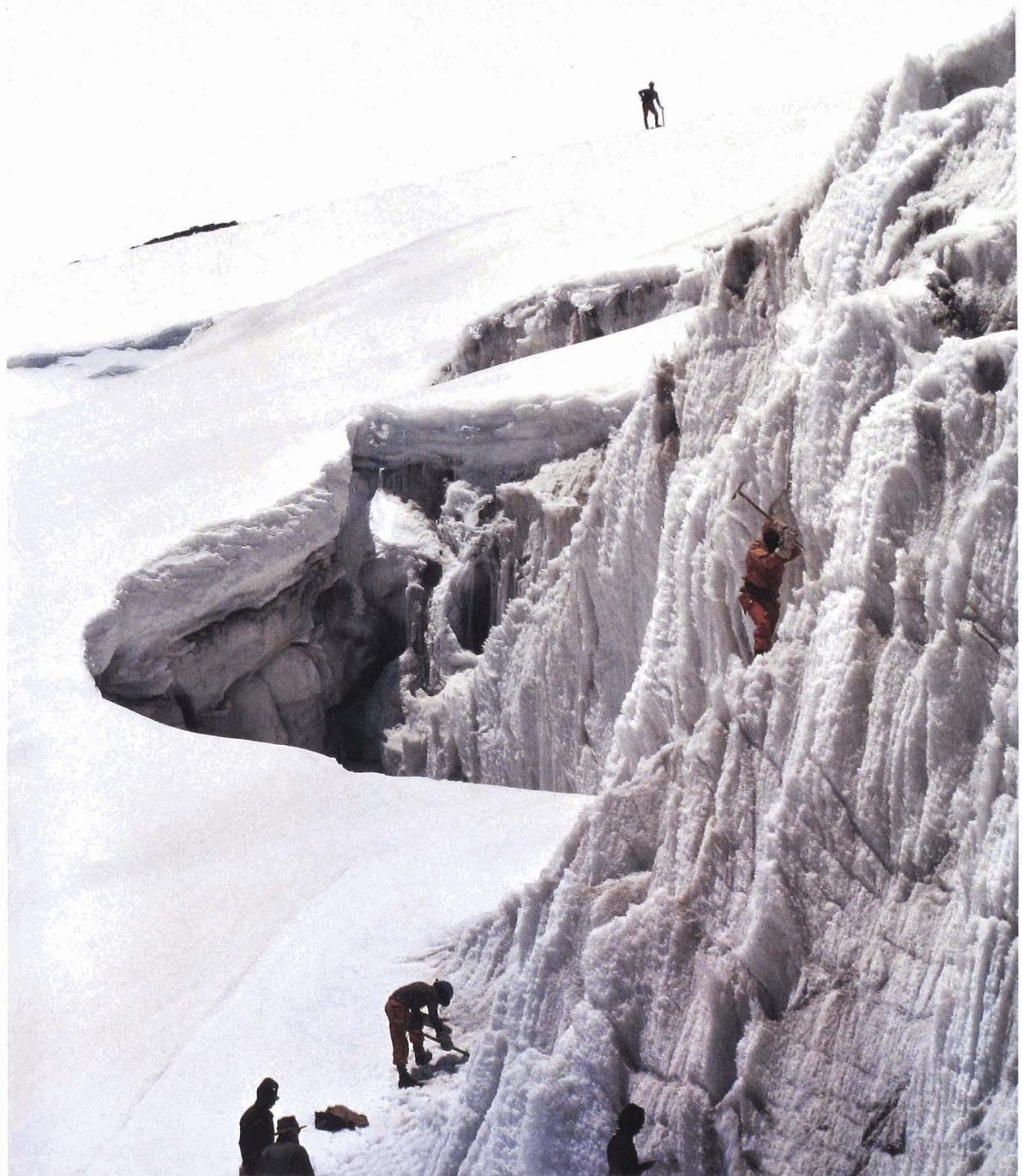
Base camp at Rudragairu for attempt on Gangotri 1, 2 & 3 peaks (1968).
Rudragairu is a confluence of 11 glaciers and is also the origin of Rudra Ganga. It is a vast plain rich in vegetation.
Shepherds reach here with their flocks in summer.



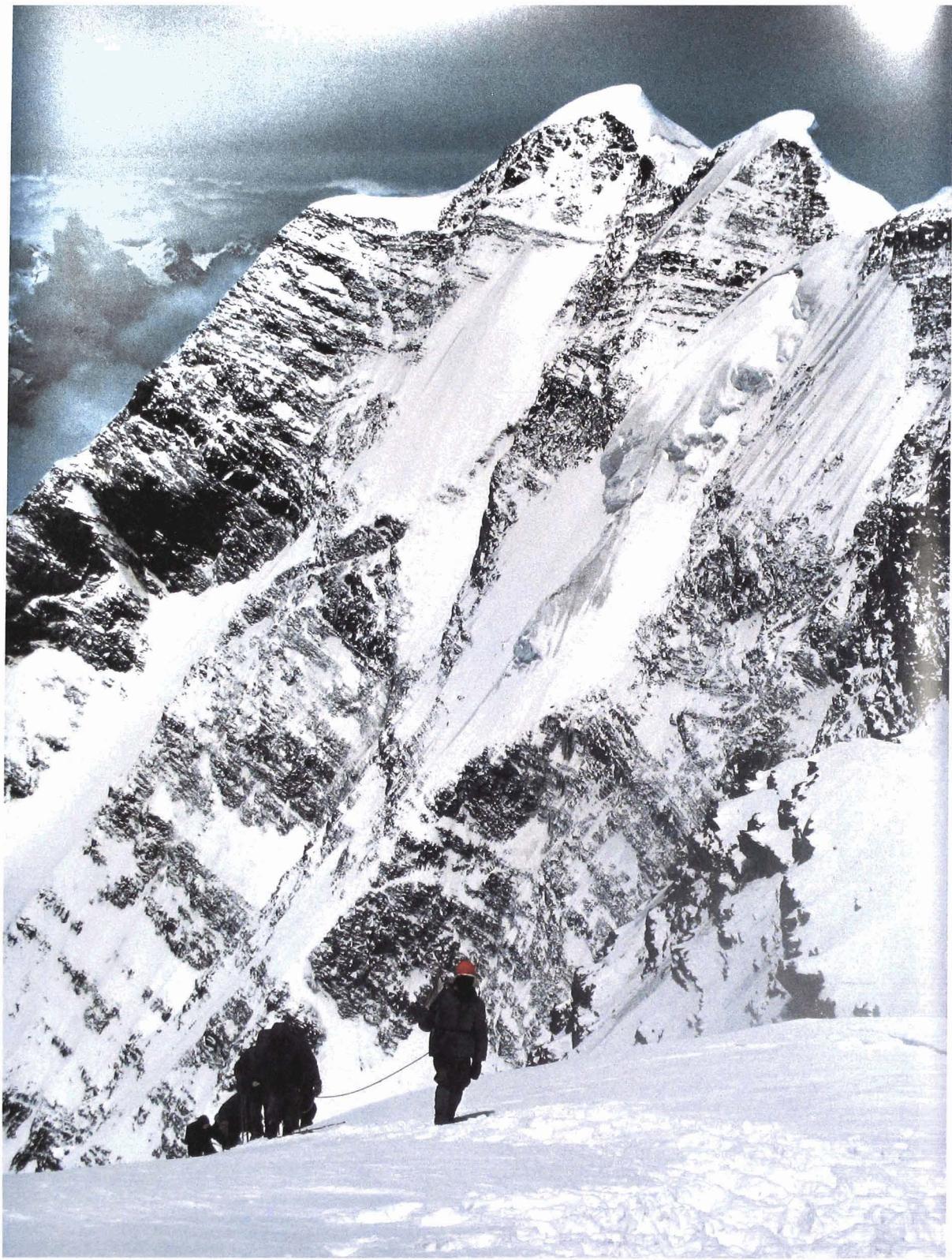
A breathtaking view of the Himalayan ranges taken from Gangotri-2 peak.



Mountaineers on their way to Gangotri-2 appear like ants in the vastness of the landscape.



Climbing to the Gangotri peaks is full of perils.



Gangotri-1 in the background during Gangotri-2 expedition. At these altitudes, lack of oxygen makes breathing very difficult and nausea & headache are common problems faced by mountaineers.



Seeking a foothold on an ice wall during the Gangotri-2 expedition. Near-vertical walls have to be climbed with the help of fixed ropes. Cutting steps in hard ice is not an easy task.



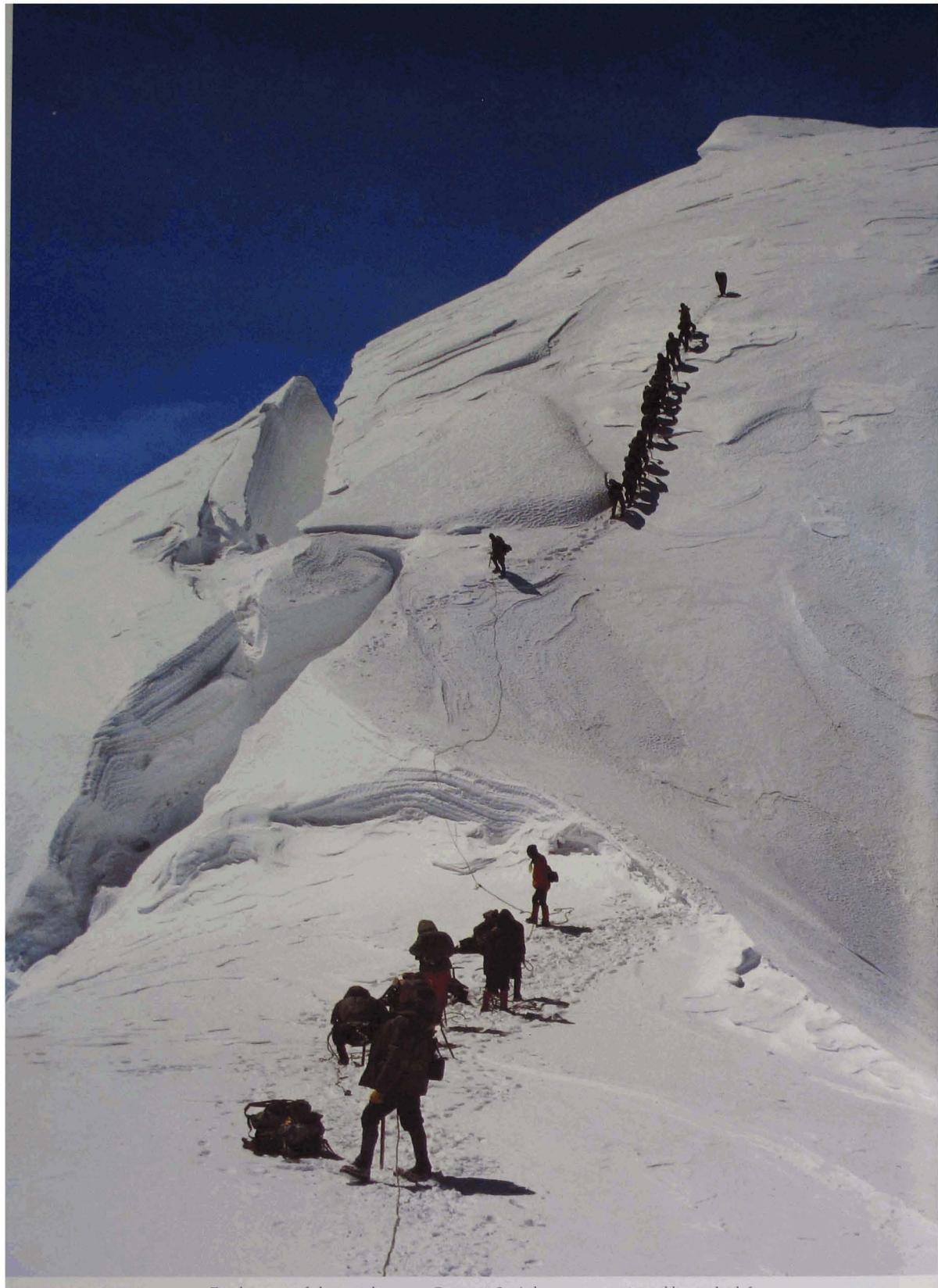


Exhausted members of a team led by the author, 150-ft below Gangotri-2. Here, strong winds are accompanied by fine ice particles.

Dawn at
Gangotri-1 as seen
from Gangotri-2
expedition route.



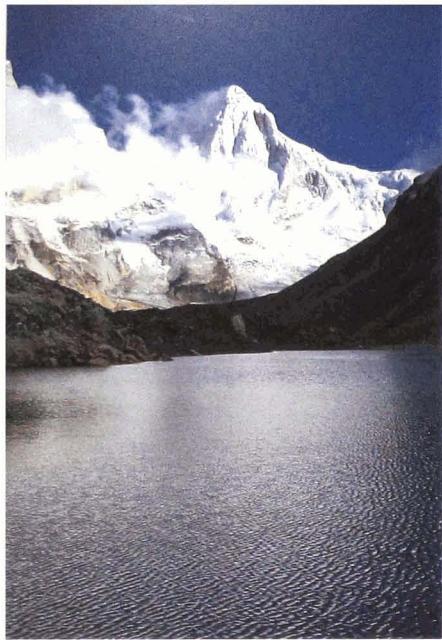
FACING PAGE:
A mountaineer
negotiating a crevasse
with the help of a
ladder. Carrying a
weight of 20-25 kgs,
progress is difficult and
hazardous.



Final ascent of the expedition on Gangotri-2. A huge crevasse is visible on the left.



Hoisting the national flag on Gangotri-2. On the peak and below, there are strong, swirling, intensely cold winds.



Blue waters, blue clouds, blue sky and white mountains meet at Kedar Taal (ht 17,000 ft).

A small rock shrine erected by mountaineers on the lake side at Kedar Taal to pray for safety and success of their expeditions.

Yamuna valley. At night the glow of the lights of Mussoorie and Dehradun in the foot hills is also visible from here.

Kedar Taal

Encircled by these peaks, at a height of 17,000 ft is Kedar Taal. This lake has a circumference of 1.5 to 2 kms. Only daring and hardy adventurers are able to reach this place after travelling for two days from Gangotri. On the way they have to camp at places called Bhoj Kharak and Kedar Kharak. Both these places have streams of water and are protected from strong winds. There are perilous places on this route and this climb is dangerous if attempted without an experienced guide and 'reliable' coolies. It is safer to have the third camp near or at Kedar Taal itself.

The water of Kedar Taal is as clear as crystal – so clear that the bottom of the lake can be seen as clearly as the surrounding peaks reflected in the waters. The author has seen many lakes and ponds in the Himalaya during his travels but Kedar Taal is unique and unmatched in natural beauty. In winter the lake freezes and fresh snow falls over it. From November to February-March one can walk on this frozen lake. Even skating can be done but one has to be careful. Once the leader of an expedition from Pune nearly drowned when the ice in the middle of the lake cracked. At this height the snow is hard and transparent like glass. One reason for this is that in winters the sun lies to the south and therefore there is a constant shadow of the mountain over the lake. By April the lake melts again. Then the reflection in the lake of the mountains on all four sides provides a transcendental experience. The author has seen this wonderful





view five times. At night the moon and stars seem to be shining not in the sky but on earth. The reflection of the full moon in the lake is a sight fit for the gods. Kedar Taal is considered holy. Occasionally, cranes visit this place. A rare kind of fish is found in this lake. The author has successfully climbed the near by Jigin-1 and Jigin-2 peaks, from where the view of the Garhwal Himalaya is breathtaking.

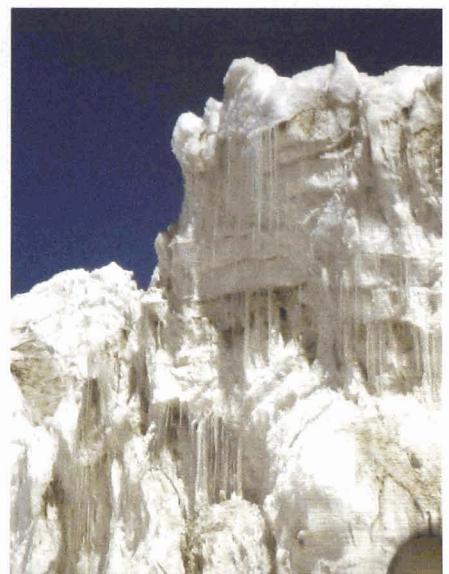
Kedar glacier lies to the left of Kedar lake. The glaciers of many peaks merge into the Kedar glacier. This glacier is the source of river Kedar Ganga. Kedar Taal also takes its water from this glacier. In summers there grow hundreds of varieties of flowering plants even at this altitude. Fain Kamal and Brahma Kamal are the prominent flowers. Medicinal herbs include Atees, Kaurai and Archa. There is a Thelu (juniper) shrub here whose leaves provide fragrant oil. The shrub burns easily because of the oil in its leaves. Kedar glacier has a wide valley. Musk deer and snow deer are found here. Grass and other Himalayan herbs also grow in this area. Attracted by this grass, shepherds arrive here with their flocks of sheep and camp for three months during the summers. The leaves of birch trees are fed to the sheep and goats.

Thalaisagar

Thalaisagar is a very dangerous peak. There are fortress-like high snow walls. To climb up, one has to drive pegs into the vertical snow walls. Many mountaineers have lost their lives in the snowslides here. And many bodies are still buried in snow. There have been several attempts on the Bhrigupanth peak too. In the Bhrigupanth range there are two small peaks called Ganesha and Hanuman Tekri.

Perfect synchronization. As the first rays of the sun touch the peaks the waters of Kedar Taal catch the reflections of Thalaisagar, Bhrigupanth and Jigin peaks. To take such a pic one has to take position at the right place much before dawn.

Massive ice walls present ever-changing challenges to mountaineers.





Colourful wild flowers add a soft touch to the steep climb from Kedar Kharak to Kedar Taal.
Bharal (mountain goats) and snow bears can be found at these heights.

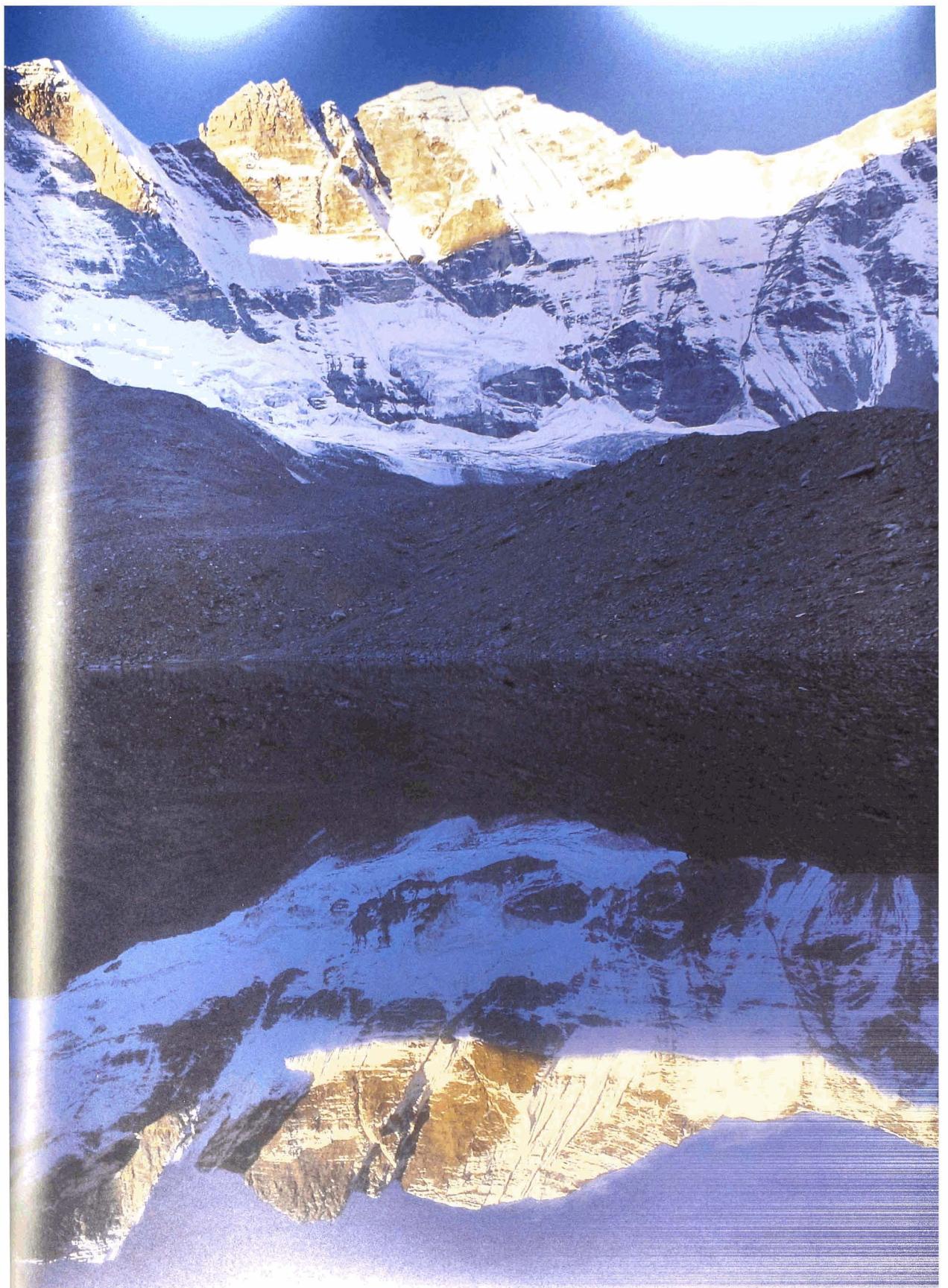


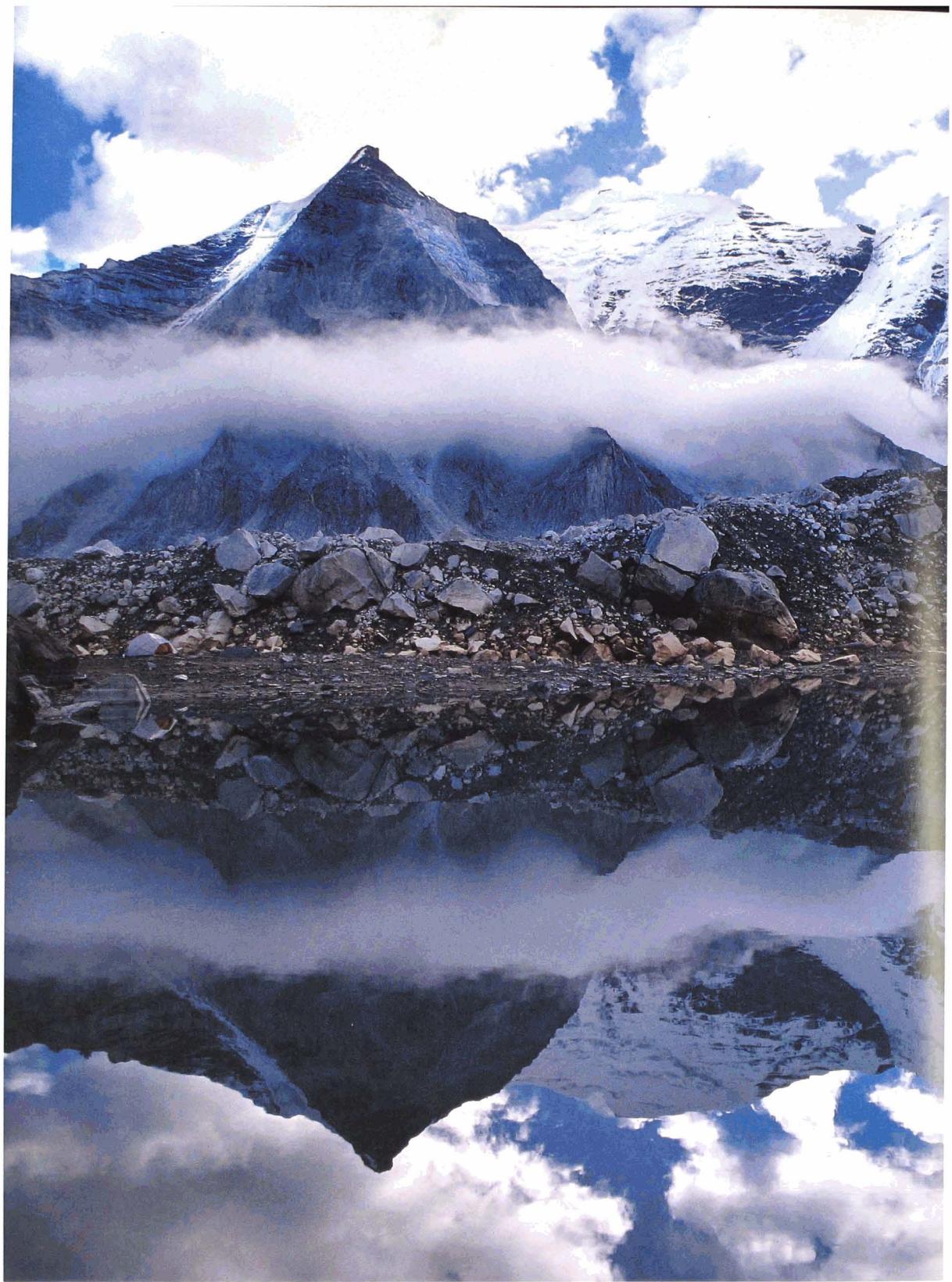
Frequent landslides render this stretch of about 2 kms in the Kedar Ganga valley a hazardous undertaking.
One has to be an expert dodger of stones rolling downhill at great speed to succeed in getting across.



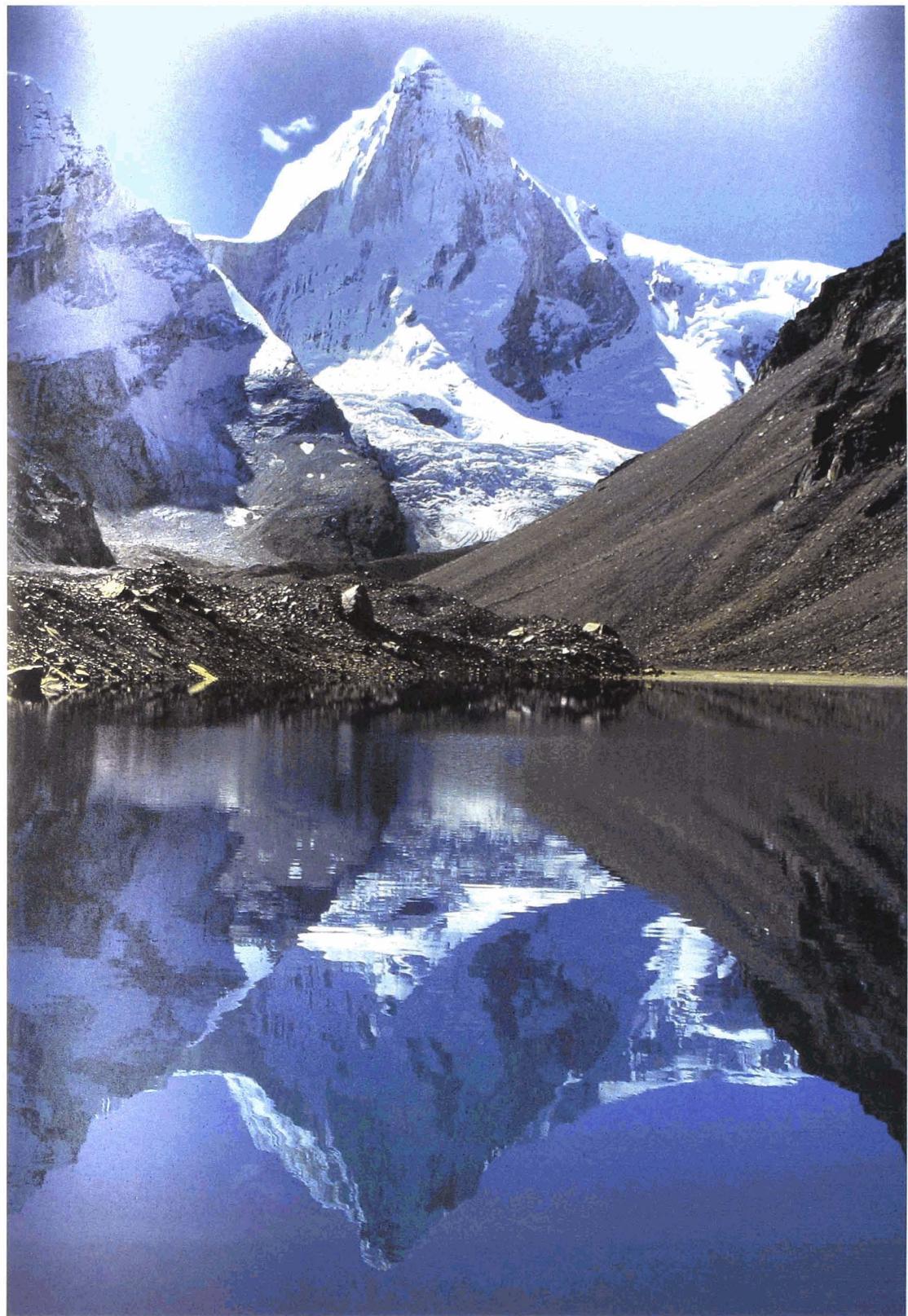
Bhrigupanth 'peaks' in Kedar Taal.

FACING PAGE: Jogen mountain
its image in the crystal clear waters of Kedar

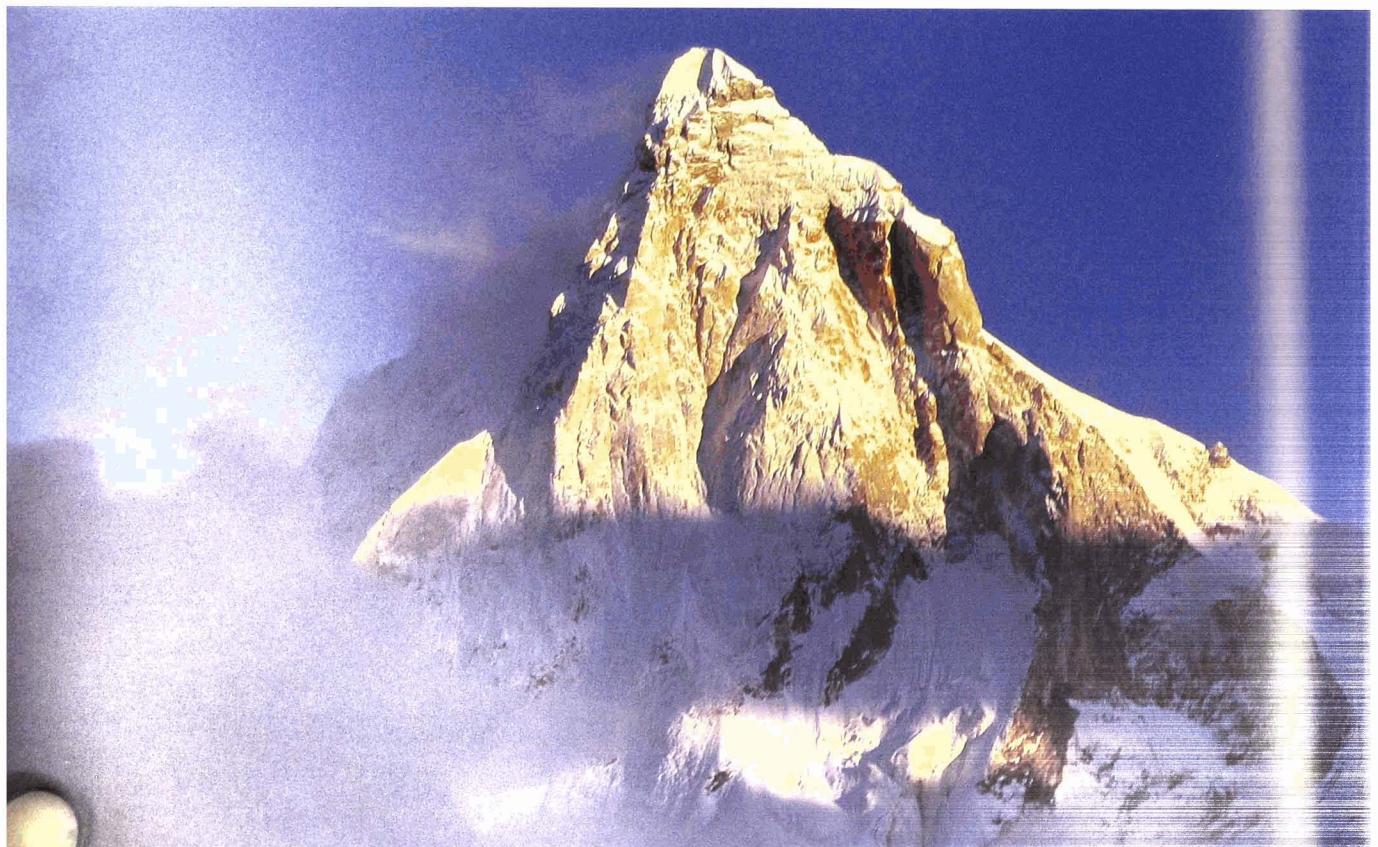




Pyramid shaped Hanuman Tekri peak mirrored in Kedar Taal.



Till recently, few mountaineers attempted to reach this fascinating place. Kedar Taal has shrunk a great deal over the years (pic 1964).



While extremely beautiful, these places are also extremely frightening. Day and night, especially in March-April, avalanches occur here accompanied by deafening sounds like cannon fire. A cloud of snow forms in the air which rains down in the form of sleet. This shower extends over a wide area. To save themselves from sleet, the climbers leave their tents and take shelter under the rocks. The sleet at times is accompanied by strong winds. Small icicles as hard as glass, strike the nose, ears and mouth like bullets, and are extremely painful. Injuries thus sustained leave blue marks on the face. Many mountaineers have died in such sleet. The only way to protect oneself is to kneel down, face downwards, with the forehead touching the ground, and keep taking long breaths. As if this danger from snowslides is not enough, the temperature also plummets suddenly. On such occasions, climbers should dig a pit and lie in it huddled together.

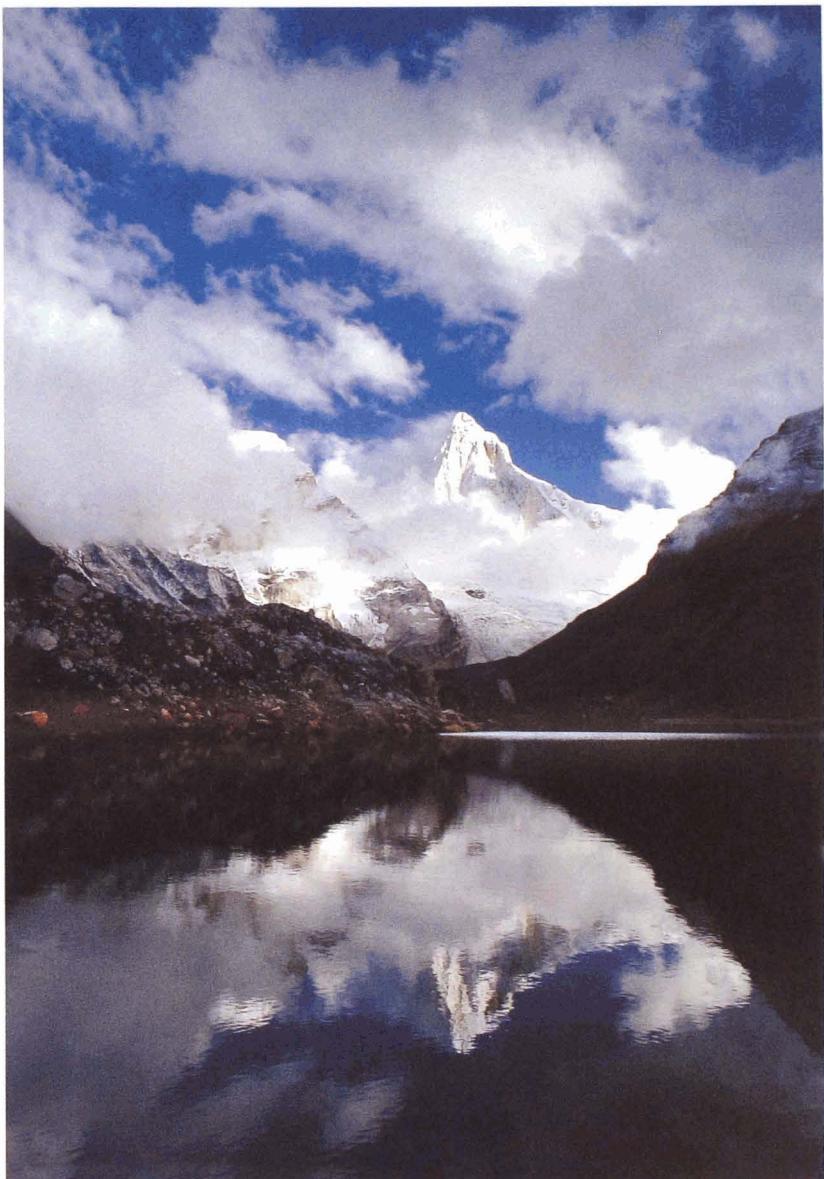
The Old Pilgrim Route to Gomukh

The old Gangotri to Gomukh route, along the south bank of Ganga, is no longer in use. There was 'Ganga Garden' on this route which has now been appropriated by several ashrams. To reach Gomukh or the valley of Bhriegupanth mountain one had to crawl between two rocks. That is why that place had been named 'Garbha-yoni'. There is also a place called Banglavasa on this route, which is a forest of Bangla shrubs and Bhoj trees. This is a nice and safe place for camping and a night halt as it is protected from landslides.

Old Cheedvasa

The pedestrian track on the south bank of Ganga passes through very tough terrain. The original Cheedvasa lies on this route and is about 10-12 kms from Gangotri. Till 50 years ago, there was a large

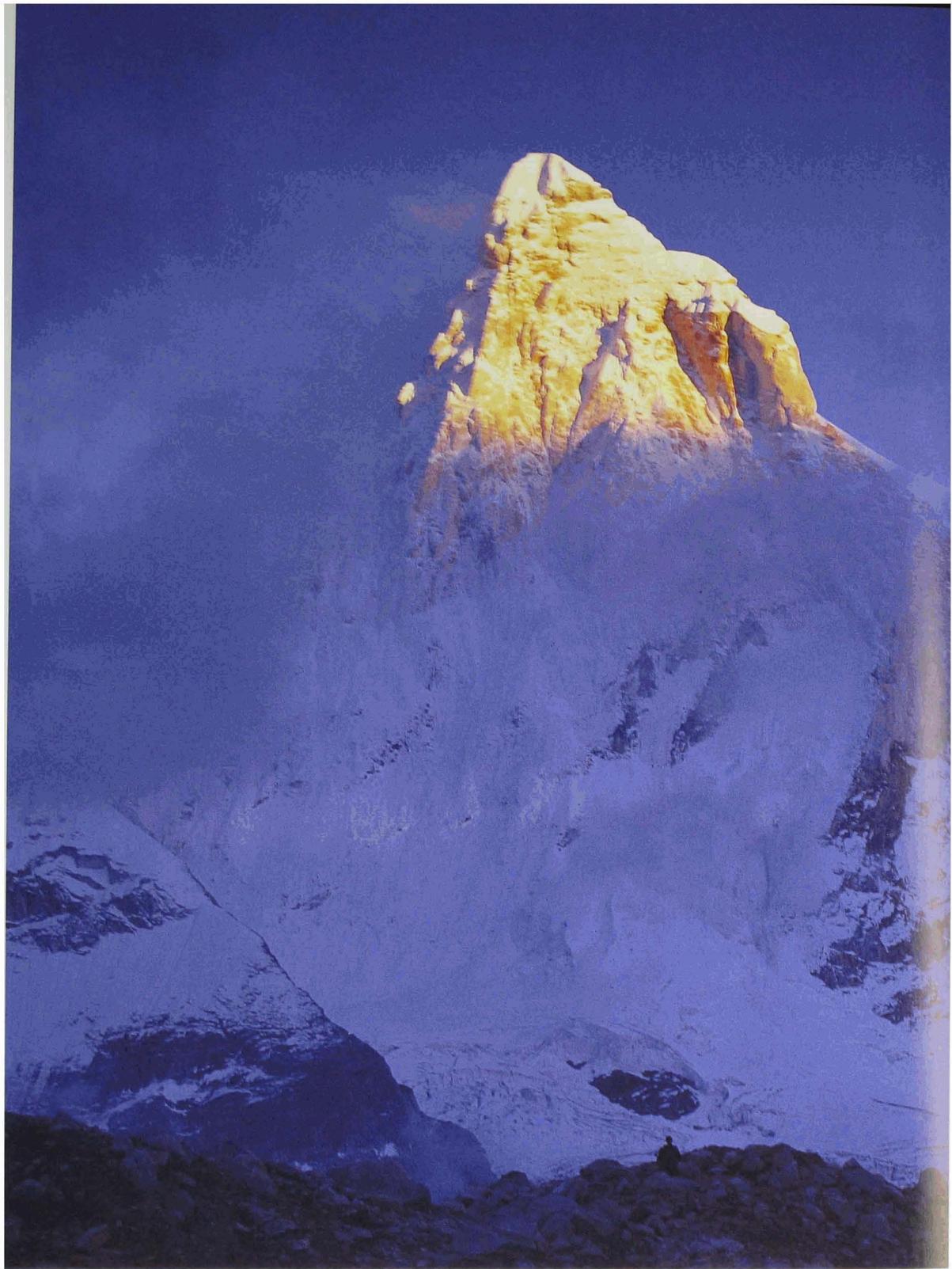
Kedar Taal
prepares to bid good bye to
yet another day.



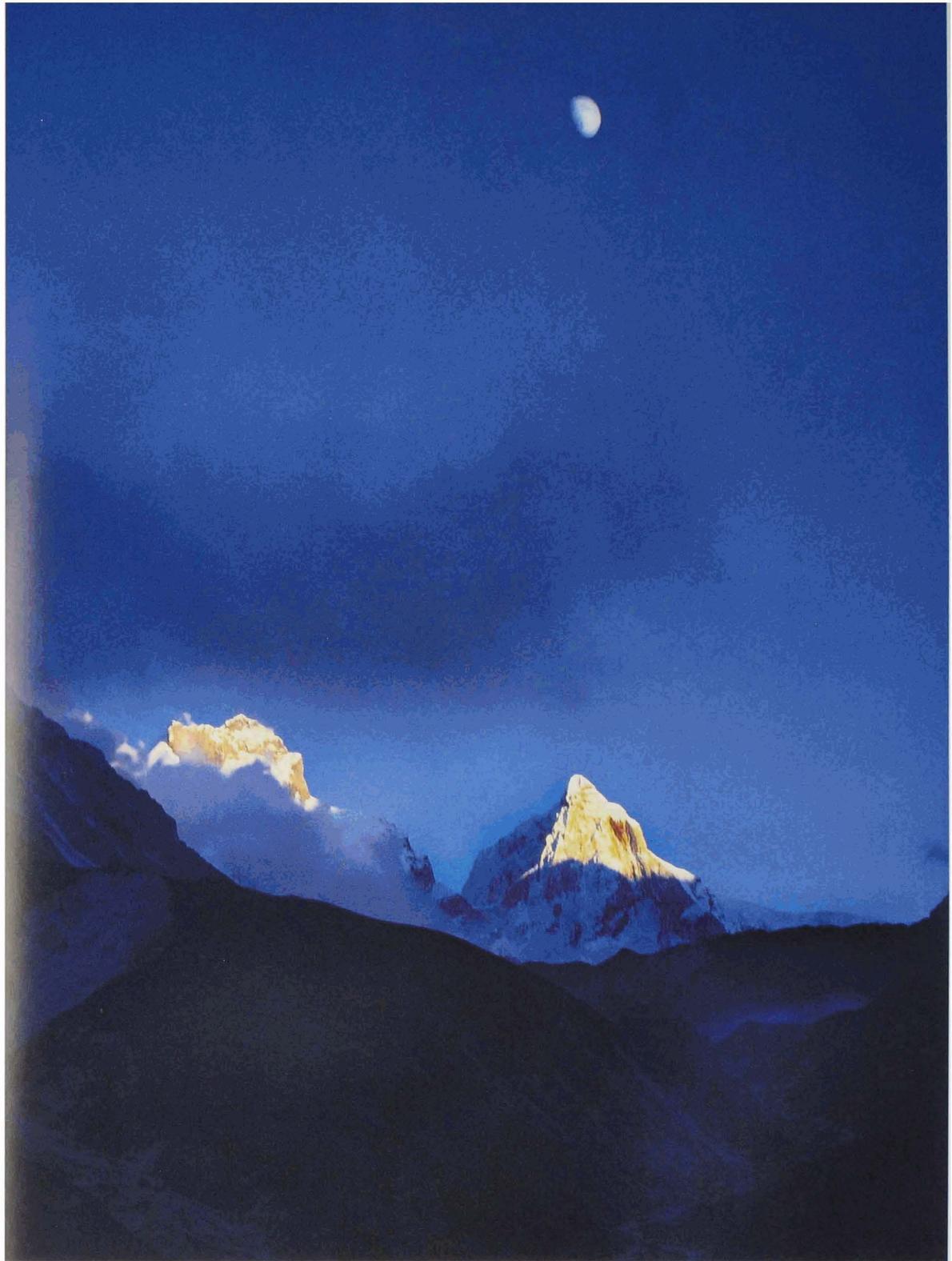
FACING PAGE:

TOP: Aarti of Kedar Taal on Sharad Poornima (winter's first full moon).

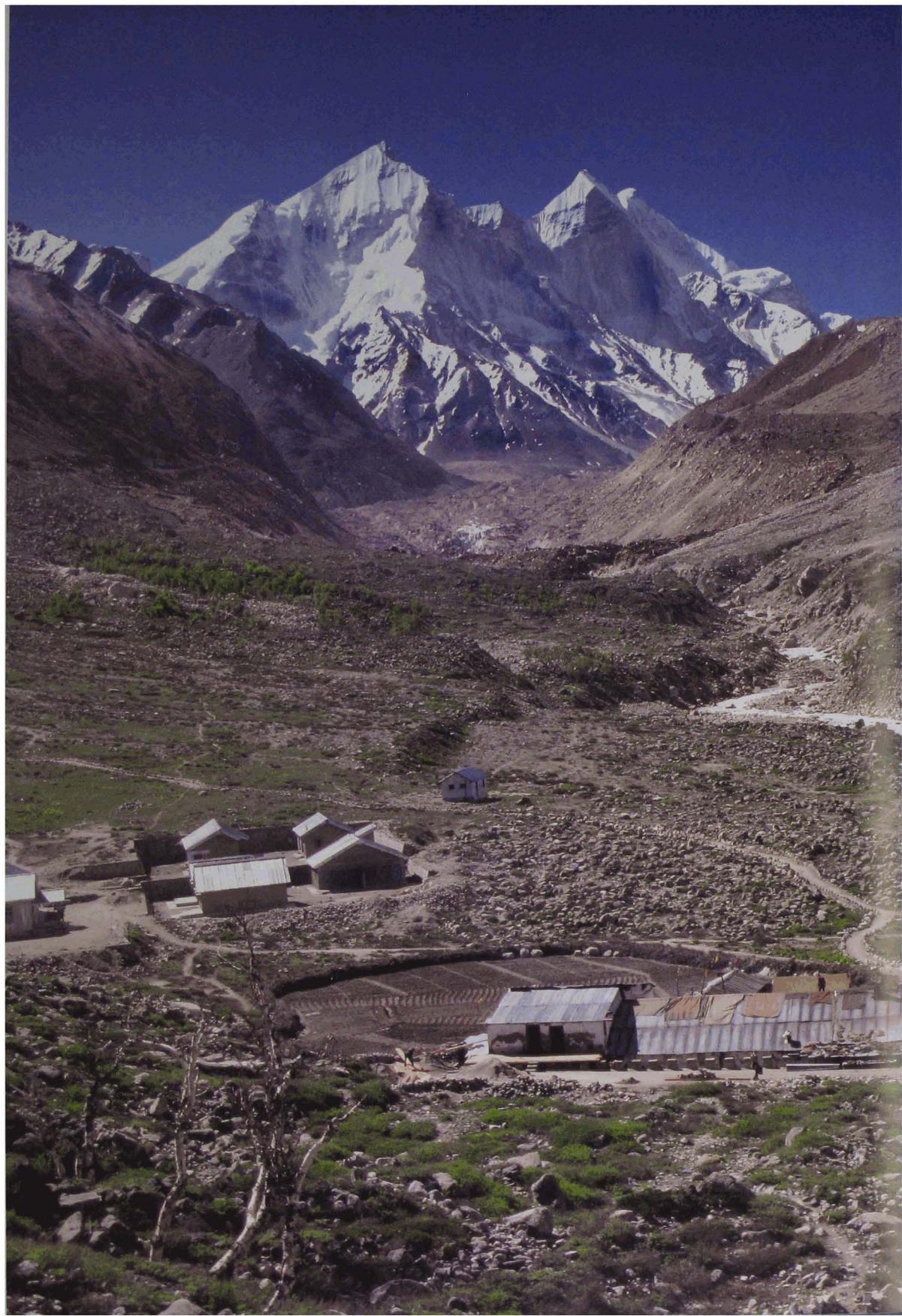
BOTTOM: Thalaisagar peak – known earlier as Patang Pithon – looks like molten gold at sunset.



Thalaisagar peak in the afternoon. While attempting to scale this treacherous peak many climbers from different countries have lost their lives.



The sun departing from peaks it had washed in gold, coordinates with the moon appearing in the sky.
On the left is Bhrigupanth and on the right is the Thalaisagar peak.



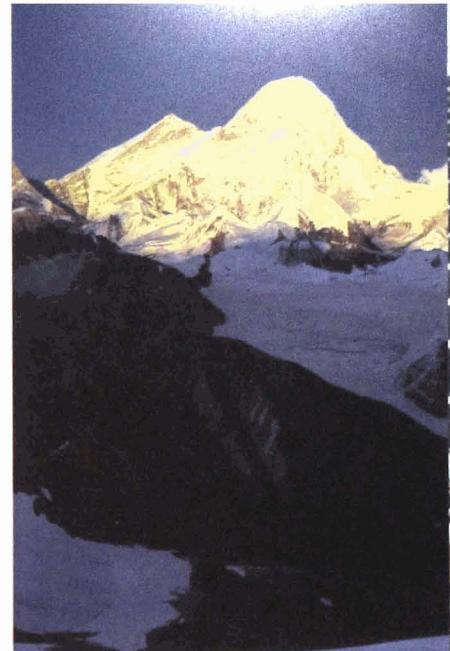
dhamashala made of stone and wood. It had four large rooms, four small rooms and two verandahs. Utensils for cooking were stored there for the pilgrims. This dhamashala was built by Seth Raghunandan Das of Moradabad and was given over to the Baba Kali Kamliwale Trust for administration. Men working for a fake sadhu removed the timber of the dhamashala and carried it across the Ganga to the new Bhojvasa where they constructed their own ashram with this material. It is unfortunate that a dhamashala, which could accommodate nearly 100 pilgrims, was thus looted and destroyed. Such a construction would cost over rupees 10-20 lakh today. This dhamashala, built at a height of 11,770 ft, also served as a secluded place for meditation at one time. Whoever reached it first used to become the administrator-owner of the place.

Above the old Cheedvasa there is the snow-covered Manda peak which has not been climbed by anybody so far. At a height of about 12,000 ft, above the now ruined dhamashala there is a vast Cheed (pine) forest. Lot of plants and herbs still grow in this forest. There is a rare variety of trees here whose wood gives a blue glow at night. After crossing a rivulet on this trail, one reaches the old Bhojvasa of this route. There is a thick Bhoj forest here. Springs abound and form many small and big ponds. On the banks of the ponds bloom a variety of colourful flowers. This is a charming place and an ideal camp site.

The old route to Gomukh is still very beautiful. Adventure-loving young people should travel to Gomukh by this route. The Cheedvasa forest, the almost plain and level Bhojvasa forest and its soft grasslands are a marvelous sight. Adding divinity to this scene are several springs, rivulets and lakes. These two forests should be declared protected or 'reserved' immediately. In spite of the illegal felling, many of the 800-1,000 year old trees have survived. There is very easy descent of a mere 25-30 metres from Bhojvasa to the banks of the Ganga. The charm lies in setting up camp in old Bhojvasa and taking a trek into the forest.

Old Bhojvasa

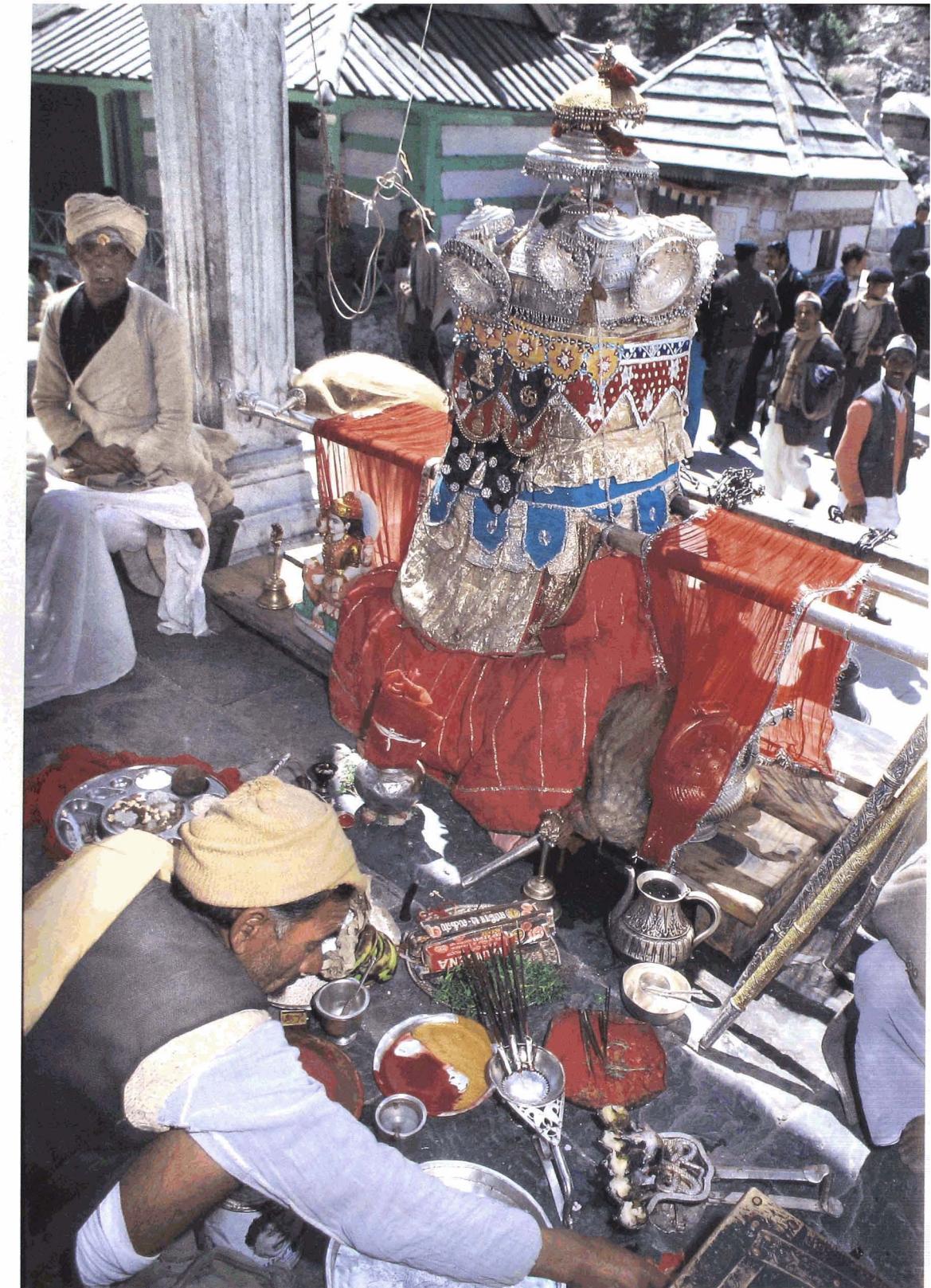
Old Bhojvasa has long been famous for meditation. Ascetics and sadhus have lived here alone to undergo penances. One Baba Raghunath meditated



Sunrise crowns Mukut peak with a spectacular glow (pic 1963).

Normally, the fledgling Ganga offers itself to a rock shaped like a Shivlinga at Gauri Kund. This Shivlinga immersed in water is located below an 80 ft waterfall and is rarely visible. It was possible to take this pic as the Shivlinga became visible after a gap of 30 years when the water level was very low due to an exceptionally severe winter.

FACING PAGE:
Bhagirath peaks with Bhojvasa
in the foreground.



When the Gangotri temple reopens after remaining closed during the winter, the idol of Gangaji is ritually decorated.
The ornamental decorations have since been stolen (pic 1984).

continuously for 10 years, and died here. He ate little and survived on potatoes, herbs and roots. For drinking he used to boil the leaves of the Bhoj tree in water.

It is a matter of regret that people no longer perform pilgrimages on foot. This has led to the closure of many convenient dharamshalas on all the pilgrimage routes in Garhwal which were being managed by the Baba Kali Kamliwale Trust of Swami Vishuddhananda and his followers. No agency can now provide service on this scale to the poor pilgrims and sadhus. These dharamshalas, worth lakhs of rupees, have been sold cheap notwithstanding their historic value. The plight of old dharamshalas in all pilgrim centres has been the same. In towns like Haridwar and Rishikesh, these dharamshalas, which were public property, have been appropriated by individuals. They have converted them into hotels with modern amenities. They are still called dharamshalas, but their present owners extort high tariff from pilgrims.

There is hardly any place now left for the poor pilgrims who used to come with small bundles on their head from various parts of the country. They have to spend their nights under the open sky, in rain and cold. In Gangotri itself, over 100 pilgrims spend chilly nights huddled together in a verandah measuring 25 ft by 4 ft. And for this too, they are charged a stiff rent. Sometimes the belongings of such humble people are stolen, and there have been cases of rape of poor women. Even at the time of worship and bathing, the pilgrims' money and belongings have been stolen. The police and the *panda-pujaris* of the temple do not provide any help to victims. The result is that such pilgrims find themselves without a single paisa to return home. There is corruption in all public



Too young to bear this burden.

Flowers and lush vegetation in Pushpavasa beyond old Bhojvasa. Now uncontrolled grazing has denuded the landscape.





Mother and child from Garhwal.

Cloud bedecked Bhrigu peak,
Bhrigu glacier and Bhrigu valley.

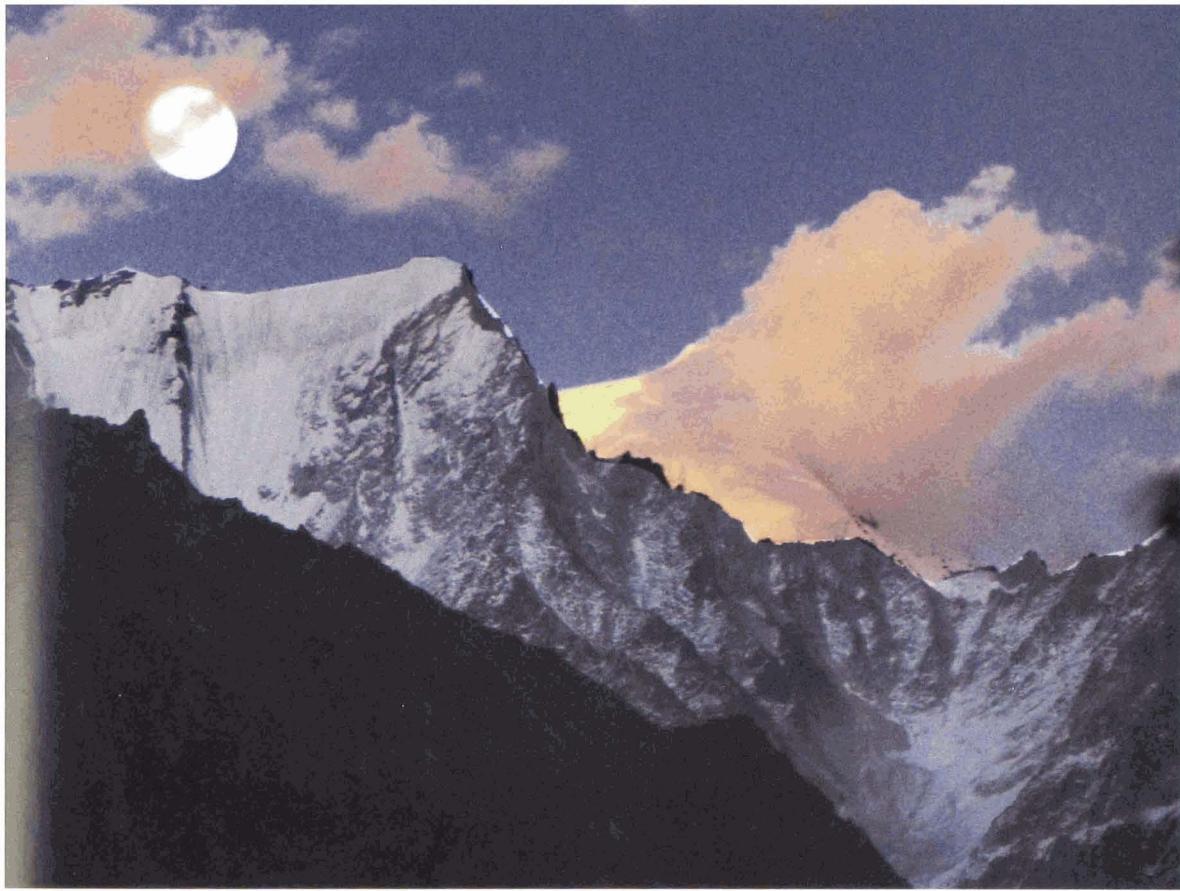
construction activities. Unless Hindu society comes forward to reform the management of its temples, the situation is likely to worsen.

Bhrigu Mountain

The difficult route to the almost inaccessible Bhrigu mountain lies by the Bhrigu river. After a climb of a few kilometres, one reaches the Bhrigu valley. A little above, one can reach the Thelu forest which is almost a plain. Shepherds used to reach this height with their flocks, but now they have stopped going there. Flora and fauna are found in abundance in Bhrigu valley and Thelu forest. Apart from flowers, roots and herbs, many kinds of birds are also seen here. Among the birds here are the yellow-beaked and pink-footed Chang-chu which keep hovering in the sky in search for food. Among the animals there are snow deer, tigers, brown bears and the catlike fur-bearing tutrail. Its colouring ranges between light brown to black. The astonishing thing about this small animal is that it can kill even a deer. It attacks the feet of sleeping deer, snapping the veins with its sharp teeth. It prefers to eat the eyes and the heart of its prey. Tutrails live in packs and they hunt together. They also hunt the tailless rainda, which local people call a mouse but actually belongs to the rabbit family. Rainda is vegetarian and is found upto heights of 20,000 ft and sometimes ventures into the camps of mountaineers.

To reach Bhrigu valley one should ford the river in the morning. After sunrise and the rise in day temperature, the flow of the river takes the form of a flood. Some people have lost their lives in trying to cross the river during daytime. If it is necessary to cross the river in the day, then one must climb up two to three kilometres to the Bhrigu glacier and then cross it at a safe place.





A study in contrast. The white purity of the moon offsets the flaming clouds and the dark blue valley below mount Matri.

*Nobody can surpass Nature as a designer.
Himalayan butterflies are its best examples.*



Following the south bank trail further up after Bhojvasa, there is a place called Pushpavasa (abode of flowers) – so named by Swami Tapovanam Maharaj because of a large variety of flowers which grow here during the summer. The view of the mountain ranges, peaks and the Ganga valley below from here is breathtaking. This place is at 13,000 ft and after 2 p.m., the temperature plummets making it exceedingly cold. People often complain here of breathlessness, headache, vomiting and blood pressure. During a tour in 1962, one tourist even fainted. He was revived by igniting a fire and giving him a hot drink made from roots and herbs. One should not neglect any physical complaint or weakness here. Immediate rest and treatment is advised otherwise one's life can be in danger.

Above Pushpavasa and right upto Gomukh there are big and small stones and massive rocks through which one has to find a way carefully. Moving beyond these rocks one comes across two or three waterfalls. Then comes Gomukh, a sight to lift up the most weary spirit, the most tired traveller. The scenic beauty of Gomukh is a marvel and the first sight renders one speechless with wonder. Gomukh literally means cow's mouth – it once resembled a cow's mouth, but nowadays its face is constantly changing. ☺

Gomukh and Beyond

Gomukh is now the lower tip of Gangotri glacier. Massive sections of hardened ice and centuries old rocks riding on the glacier keep falling here from time to time. Gomukh is the mouth of a tunnel at the bottom of the glacier from where the Ganga makes its first appearance. The source of the Ganga is unique and a rare creation of Nature. It is truly said that only the blessed get an opportunity to visit this place and take a holy dip.

The flow of the Ganga becomes rapid and has a large volume of water immediately after it appears from the glacier. Even at the source the span of the Ganga is 50 to 100 feet. The volume of water is larger in summers due to rapid melting of snow in the glaciers. It is not possible to ford the Ganga here. On both banks, large sections of ice float continually. A bath can be taken only when the sun is shining. Generally, the weather at Gomukh worsens in the afternoon and it becomes unbearably cold. Pilgrims must be prepared for all eventualities, including hailstorms. Above Gomukh, the subterranean Ganga is called Salila. There are large holes on the glacier which appear like huge wells. It is dangerous to go near these wells because sections of ice and rocks keep falling down in them. While crossing this glacier, a frightening sound of water below is heard. The Ganga valley is unexpectedly broad at Gomukh.

The water at Gomukh is muddy. There are minute particles in it which settle down if you keep the water still in a container for some time. The water then becomes crystal clear. The taste of Ganga water is different from that of any other river water. The temperature of the Ganga water remains close to freezing point due to ice blocks falling in it constantly. One dip in the water and hands and feet become numb. That is why it is recommended to remain in the sun and massage the body with Ganga water as if one is using oil. This bath is rejuvenating and removes all fatigue. Till a few years ago there was a large reservoir alongside Gomukh. Its water used to be warmed by the rays of the sun and it was very pleasant to have a bath in it. Different people experience different reactions at Gomukh. Some are so



Gomukh, where the mighty Ganga emerges from beneath the glaciers.



Exquisite colours, eyecatching designs – whether they are Himalayan moths or butterflies, the effect is always a visual feast.

Gomukh, the mouth of Gangotri glacier. As the ice melts or crumbles, the heavy burden of debris falls at the bottom.

enthralled, they do not want to return to their homes. Some get frightened. The devout report feeling a spiritual peace descending on them.

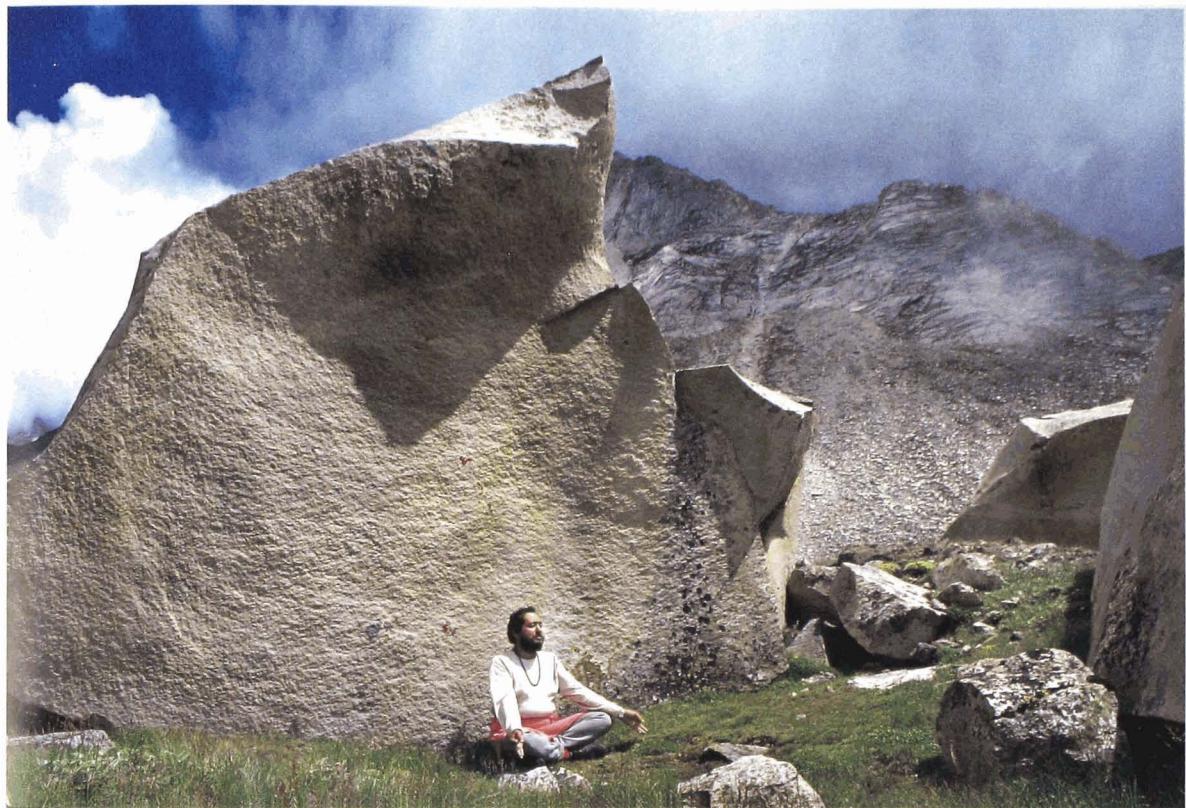
The Value of Guides

Travelling above Gomukh, or even trekking to Gomukh, can be very dangerous. One must take along an experienced guide. In the region from Cheedvasa to Gomukh and above from Gomukh to Tapovan, Sundarvan, Raktavarna valley and Bhrigu valley, the sun and its heat remain as long as the sun is shining. But in the afternoon the weather generally deteriorates. Thick clouds form and engulf the sun. Strong winds start blowing and the temperature drops by several degrees within a few minutes. Suddenly it becomes biting cold. If one is not properly clad, hands, feet, nose and ears - all become numb. At such times it becomes difficult even to return to a safe place. It is seldom that any help is available.

The Solitude of Gangotri

Those returning from Gomukh used to describe it as a real heaven and would refer to it as the residence of Lord Shiva and Mother Ganga. But Gangotri and not Gomukh is the right place for meditation in the higher regions of the Garhwal Himalaya. It was not an accident that the ascetics and *mahatmas* of yore chose this place. The reference to its grandeur and holiness in the ancient Puranas is very apt. Its geographical position is such that in spite of being on the banks of





Nandanwan (ht 17,000 ft). Many seekers head for the higher altitudes in search of spiritual bliss.

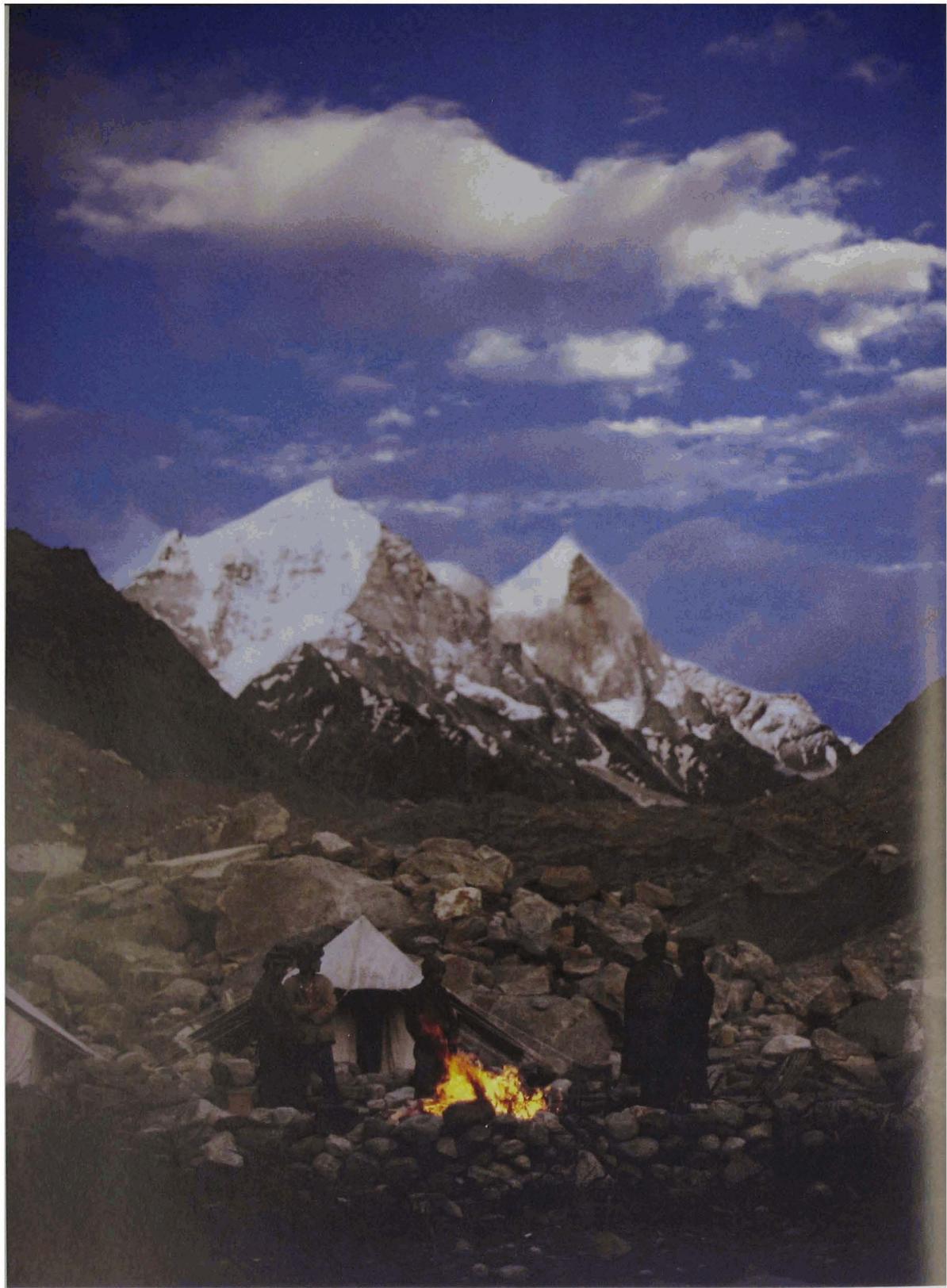
the Ganga, it enjoys some sunshine even in winters. The northern bank near the temple gets the winter sun for two hours while the southern bank gets it for only one and a half hours. If the sky is clear, then the sun provides ample heat because of the clear atmosphere. A bath is easier at this time. About two kilometres below Gangotri, at the Pakauri Nala and Nainchi Paat, sunshine is available for six hours. That is why Gangotri residents go there to bask in the sun.

In 1948, when I first went to live in Gangotri, the number of permanent residents was barely five or six. There was no sadhu residing above Gangotri. Very few tourists and pilgrims went beyond Gangotri. Mountaineering was not popular. There were no means to avoid the dangers of traversing glaciers. No coolies were available to carry one's luggage. The dharamshala at Cheedvasa on the old route gave shelter to the few daring sadhus who had reached so far, as no one else could survive on meagre rations combined with other rigours. Sadhus are used to spending nights sitting close a small fire, called *dhuni*, and do not need many clothes or covering to ward off cold. The sadhus and ascetics travelled in groups of four or five after having obtained dry rations — mainly rice, wheat flour and lentils to last for a few days from the dharamshalas. Some sadhus did leave alone but they never returned.

I, too, travelled many times to Gomukh in those days. At times I wanted to merge myself in that place and give up my body. The tales

An assembly of assorted snow forms. Who knows what secrets they are exchanging with each other about earthly mortals ...

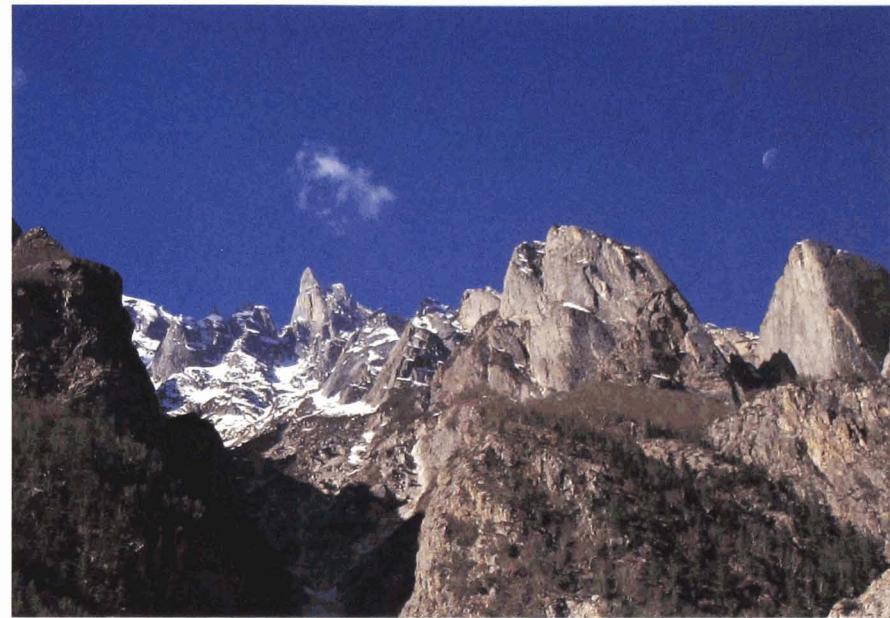




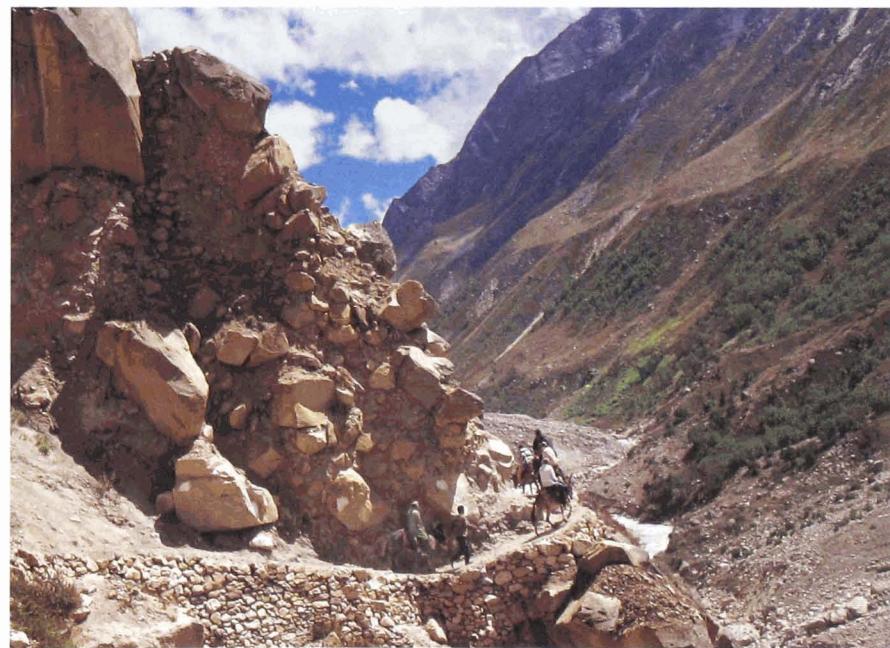
The last site suitable for camping is located two kms before Gomukh in the morain zone.

of my Guru Tapovanam Maharaj's travels inspired me to go above Gomukh and to even higher places. In the absence of any proper routes or tracks, it was normal to lose your way in those days. There were stones kept on rocks by travellers as track markers. It was only after 1962 that one or two travellers could be seen going above Gomukh. Now the state government has built a pedestrian track almost upto Gomukh which is three to six feet broad. At places it is barely two feet broad. Wooden bridges have been built on the rivulets on the way. In rocky areas, path indicators are marked out with lime. Thus pedestrian travel has now become easier, but the ascent is still difficult and tiring.

Before the road was built, there were many difficulties in travel, but the charm of the Himalayan places and their natural beauty and bounty had not been destroyed. In the olden days essential commodities like rice, wheat flour, salt and oil etc. were brought up laden on the back of Himalayan goats and sheep. These sheep and goats were called *khadus* and they would come grazing on the way. In those days cooked food – rice, *roti* and *dal* – was made available to sadhus and sanyasis by the Kali Kamliwale Trust and the Punjab Sindh Anna Kshetra, once a day. There was no food available in the evenings. Woollen blankets were rare. Nights were spent on a bed of Bhoj leaves with a small fire or *dhuni* burning alongside. Light was obtained by burning roots of Cheed trees. Called *dalli*, these roots burnt like candles but also produced smoke which turned the body black. It was in the light of the *dalli* torch that religious books



A variety of rock formations look surrealistic while on the trek to Gomukh.

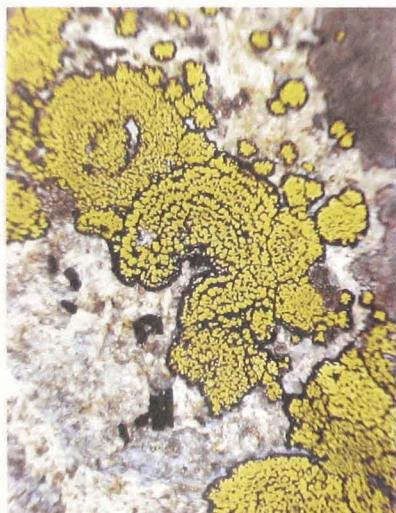


A dangerous stretch on the way to Gomukh. Several people have been crushed here due to frequent, unpredictable landslides.



A snow bridge formed in winter over the Ganga at Devdang, 5 km above Gangotri.

A modern painting!
Dry Moss on Rock, Kirti Glacier
(ht 17,000–20,000 ft).



were read in the caves and cottages. Dalli was kept as an essential item during travels. There were no special shoes, and stiff wooden sandals were of no use in the mountains. Old hessian pieces were tied on the feet to travel on snow and rocks.

Devotion and Realization

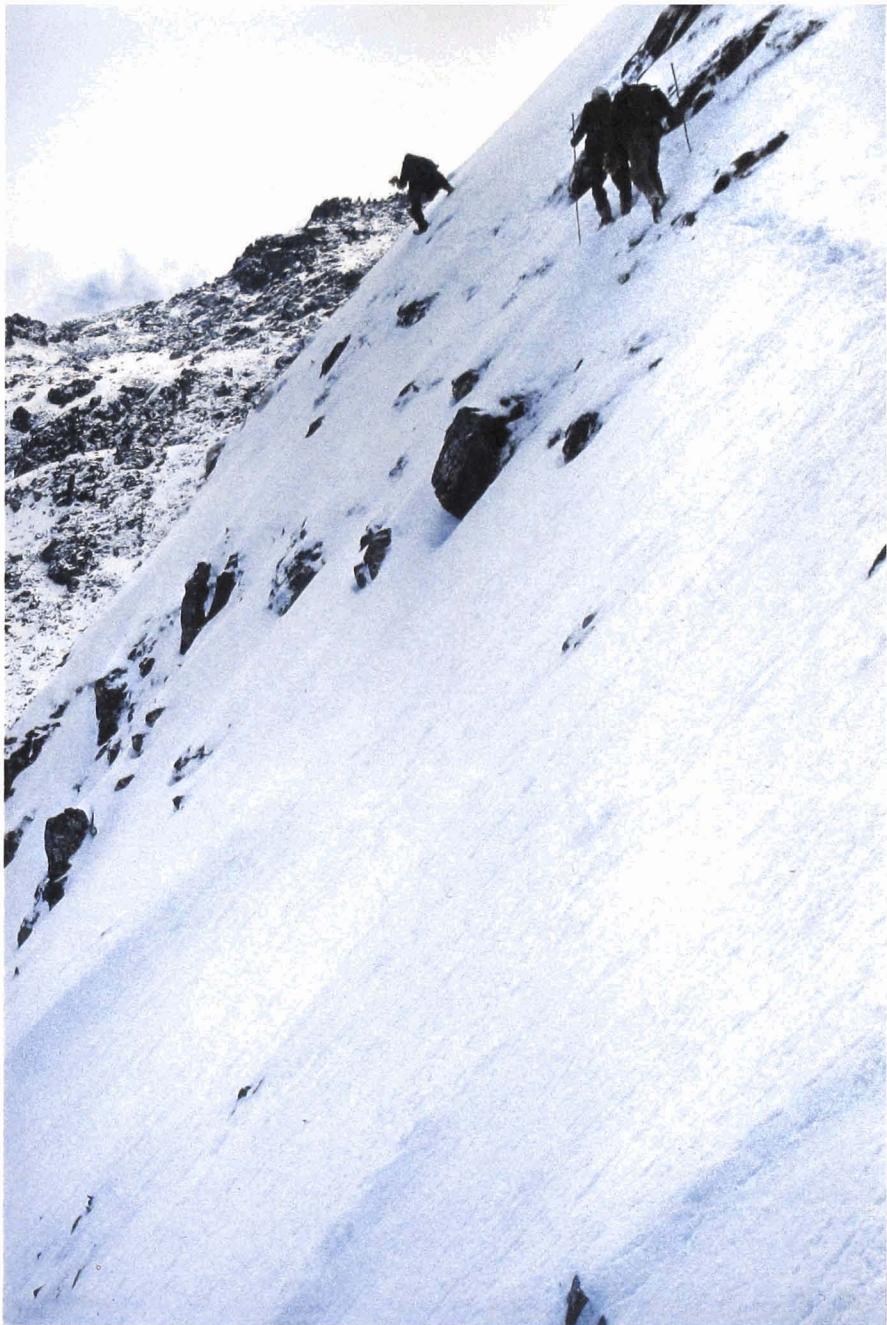
If one chooses to court difficulties with a detached mind, then one doesn't feel the pain. To remain silent for long periods of time in solitude is one of the most difficult practices. The mind is restless by nature. Not every one is capable of controlling it and spending time content with a few belongings and little food. Cold, solitude and meagre food can break the resolve of even the most adept sadhus. Only renunciants and advanced practitioners can maintain spiritual discipline which alone can lead to realization. One can leave oneself in the hands of God only through detachment and experience the bliss of God-realization. They eat for months pieces of old rotis soaked in water. They enjoy this saltless meal as if it were a delicacy. The joy of such a discipline is beyond the imagination of those who cannot go beyond enjoying sensual pleasures. Some people get attracted by the seemingly carefree life of sadhus but loneliness frightens them. Their mind keeps imagining the comforts of home and tasty food. They start wailing on remembering their family and close ones. They are unable to take interest in anything, including the food available. Their body goes out of control.

Their will power is reduced to zero. It is unpleasant even to discuss the plight of such people. Some young sadhus also meet the same fate. They neglect their daily meditation and practice and indulge in petty quarrels. Some people even lose their mental balance. It is only the rare ones who, living in this solitude, start dancing on seeing the natural beauty of such high valleys. It is they who slip into the blissful lap of God.

First Trip to Gomukh

On his first trek to Gomukh the author lost his way on several occasions and even got injured. He was young and also afraid of death. But at last he reached Gomukh and before him was the Ganga river, shining like a sapphire as she appeared from inside the ice cave with a loud roar. At first he could not believe that he had reached Gomukh. He entered the water upto his waist, took a few dips and prayed for the welfare of mankind. He felt as if he had been freed of all sins. After the bath, the warmth of the sun was very soothing. Since that first time, he travelled to Gomukh 108 times. He also recently trekked along the new north bank route. Even after the construction of bridges on the new route and installation of iron railings on the narrow way carved out of rocks, five or six mishaps occur every year.

Today there are good shelters and night resting places midway at Cheedvasa, and Bhojvasa. Several small eateries have also come up on the way. Travel has become more convenient, but the wealth of trees, roots and herbs has been depleted in the process. The Bhojvasa forest has been denuded. With the arrival of lakhs of tourists at Gangotri every year, thousands of beggars have also landed here. They not only harass the tourists but also spread filth around. Incidents of thefts have also increased. A large number of young men arrive from Nepal to work as porters. They live in deplorable conditions. Earlier there were hardly any cases of disease in Gangotri. But now various diseases are reported. The reason perhaps is over-crowding, pollution and lack of cleanliness.



On the way to Sahasrataal. Charting one's way through a sea of snow presents its own hazards.



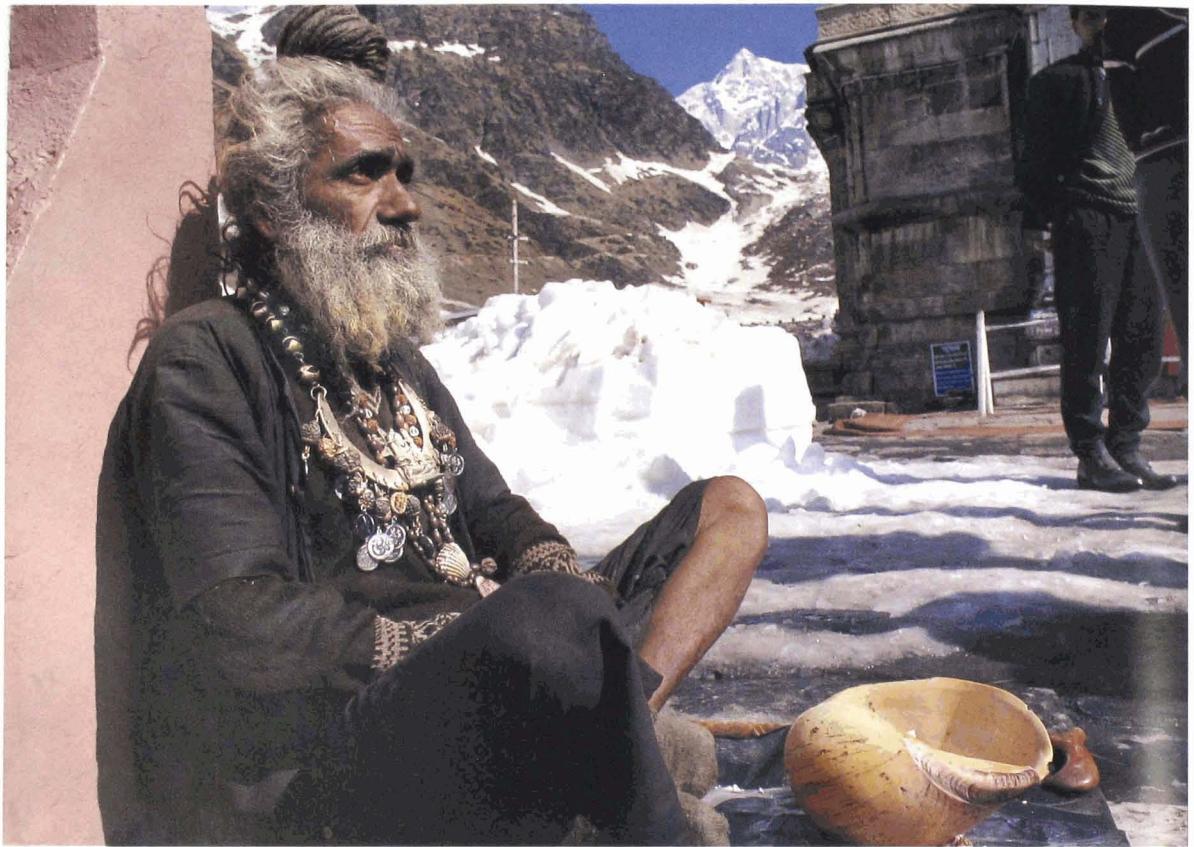
From one end of India to the other... Travelling throughout on foot, Kanwarias carry water from Gomukh, to pour over the Shivalinga at Rameshwaram. With unwavering faith they overcome the travails of the journey, and do not put their water carrier on the ground at night; instead they reverentially keep it on a stand.

FACING PAGE:
Footsteps in the snow ...
was it a Yeti?
The route to Mana Peak.

Dokrani peak, Shrikanth peak,
Dokrani glacier and Draupadi Danda.







A fakir on the stairs of a temple.

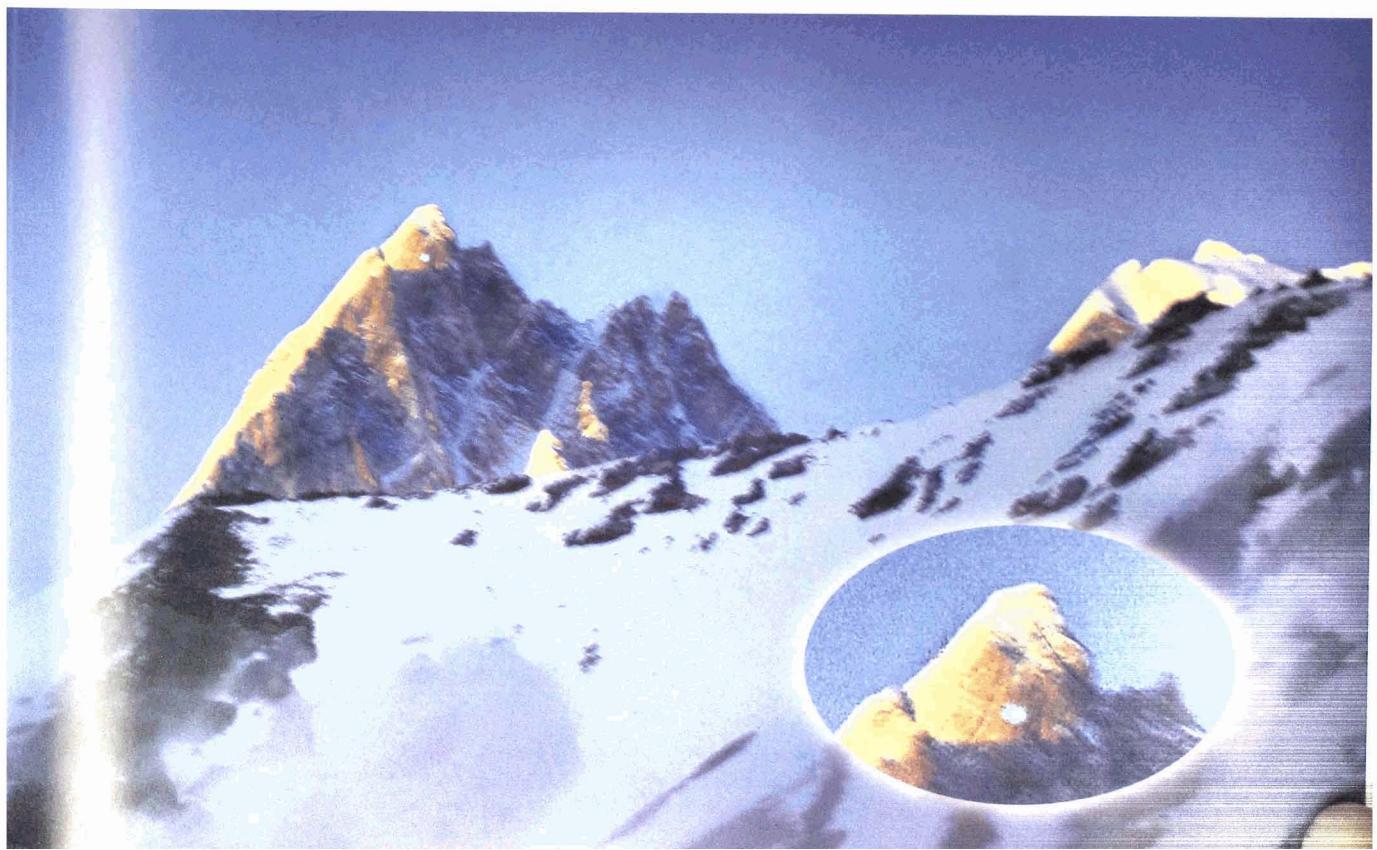
Above Gomukh

On the eastern side, above Gomukh are the mountains of Cheedvasa, Sudarshan, Matri, Koteswar, Shwetvarna, Shri Kailash, Mana-1, Mana-2 peaks, Chaturangi range, Nandanvan and Bhagirath mountain. Going by the old route, one sees Vasishtha, Bhrigu, Meru, Shivlinga and Kharchkund peaks. At a height of 14,500 ft and below the Shivlinga peak is a plain called Tapovan named after the author's Guru Tapovanam Maharaj. This is a vast area stretching from Meru glacier to Kirti glacier. The Meru peak is to the northeast of Shivlinga peak, as are the peaks of Bharat-kunna, Kirti-stambha, Kedar and Kedar Doom. In the lap of these peaks is the plain of Sundarvan named after the author by his Guru. Surrounded by snow clad mountain peaks, Sundarvan is a beautiful green expanse. This is a good place for meditation. There was a lake here, which has now dried up. Snow bears whose diet consists of grass and roots are found in this area. Snowslides or avalanches keep taking place on the surrounding peaks as part of a natural process. At regular intervals, sounds like cannon-fire break the deep silence here. The snowslides at night are very frightening. Along with blocks of ice, large rocks also tumble down. When the falling rocks crash into each other, they produce sparks in the night along with a shattering sound. A momentary flash of light is visible. Stars seem to be falling on earth and the mountain peaks seem to be producing sparklers. At times the peaks disappear behind clouds of snow. The echo of explosions keeps reverberating for a long time. The trembling of the ground gives the impression of an earthquake. If the camp is at a safe place,

FACING PAGE:

ABOVE: Kirti-stambha peak, behind which lies Kedarnath Dham. In the foreground is the Kirti glacier which merges with the Gangotri glacier (pic 1985).

BETWEEN: The 'third eye' of Lord Shiva. An unusual blue spot (enlarged in the inset), like the iris of an eye is visible near the top of mount Jogin, during the day time.



This is no alien landing from out of space:
it is a saucer-shaped lake in Chaturangi glacier,
on the Gomukh-Badrinath route.

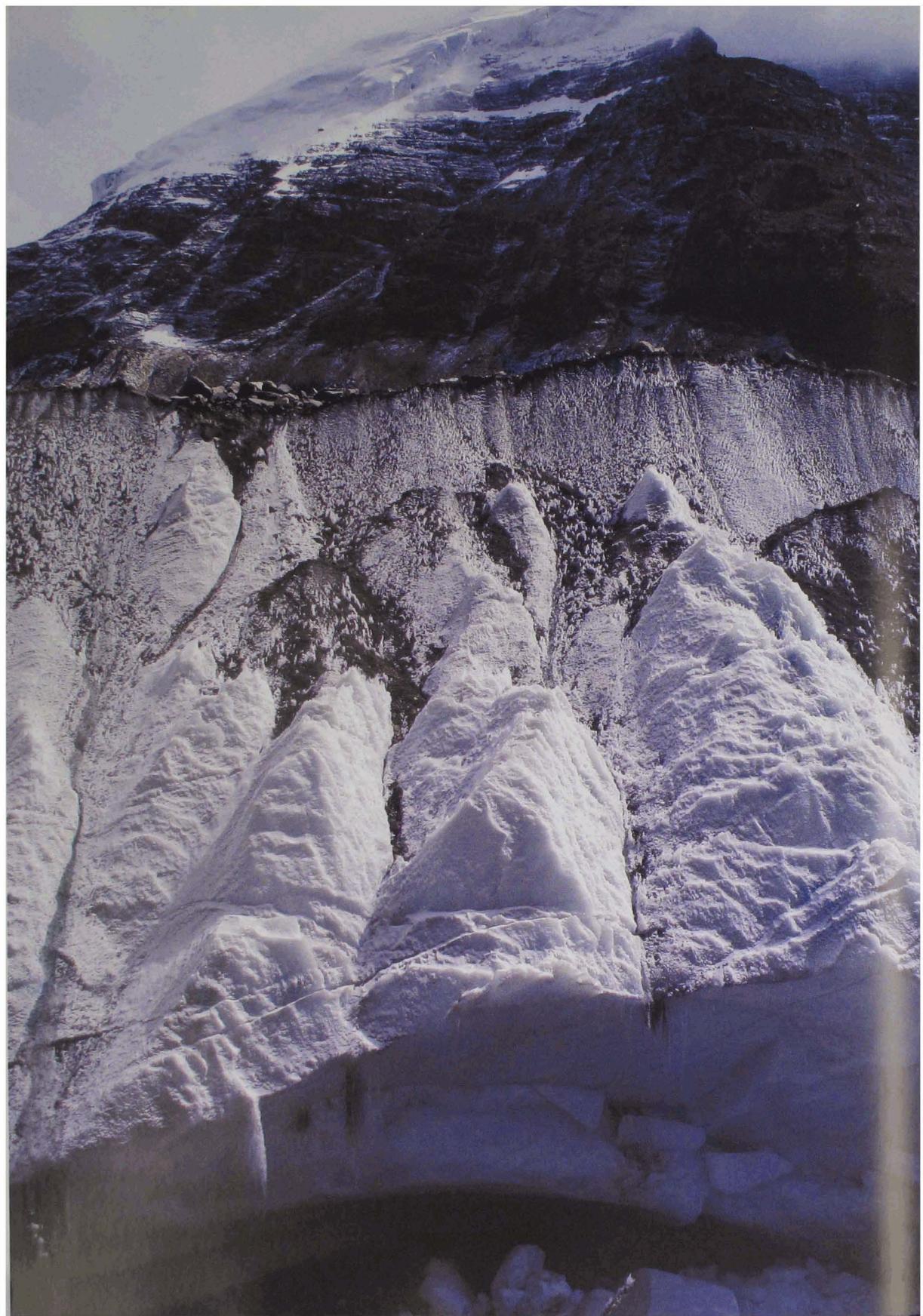




Once, Chaturangi glacier had close to a hundred lakes; many still survive and retain their original beauty (ht 18,000 ft).

It is believed that Chaturangi glacier derives its name from the four constituent glaciers – Sita, Suralaya, Satopanth and Chandra.







'Aum' formed in the clouds for a fleeting moment over a glacial lake in the Chaturangi range.

FACING PAGE: Ice furrows made from the melting of Chaturangi glacier can become a graveyard for unfortunate mountaineers.



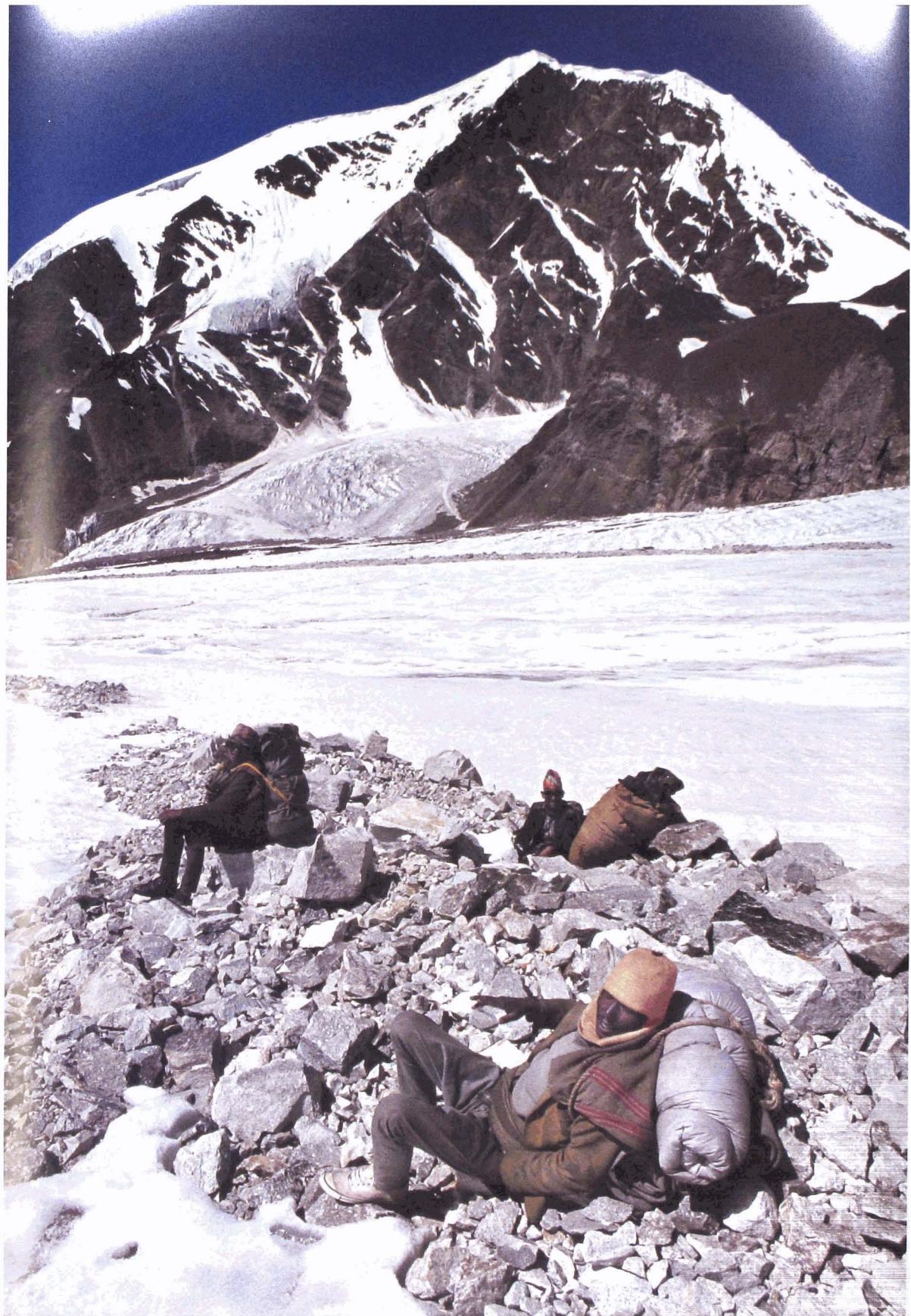
Mana twin peaks with cascades of celestial gold – purer than 24 carat gold (pic 1968).

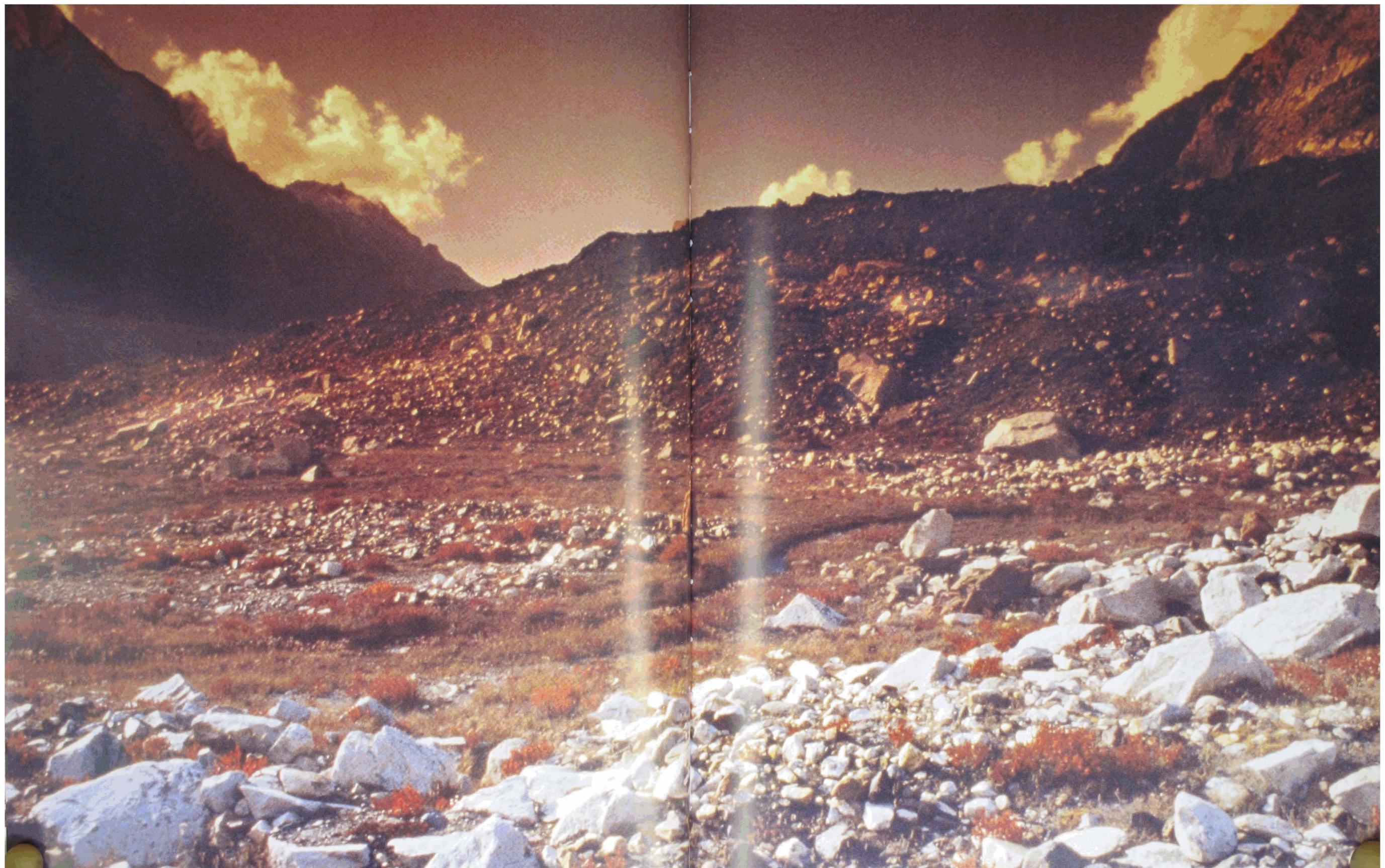


The moon on an inspection tour of the Chaturangi ranges.

FACING PAGE:
Chaturangi glacier below Mana mountain enroute from Gangotri to Badrinath. At this altitude the face and hands gets burnt by ultra-violet rays. If one is not careful, frostbite occurs and in severe cases the affected parts have to be amputated (pic 1982).

NEXT SPREAD:
A glorious mixture of colours at Nandanvan (ht 15,000-17,000 ft). Even the heavy winter snows do not affect the colourful spread: a variety of flowers and other vegetation continues to thrive.







Sudarshan peak as seen from Koteswar peak.



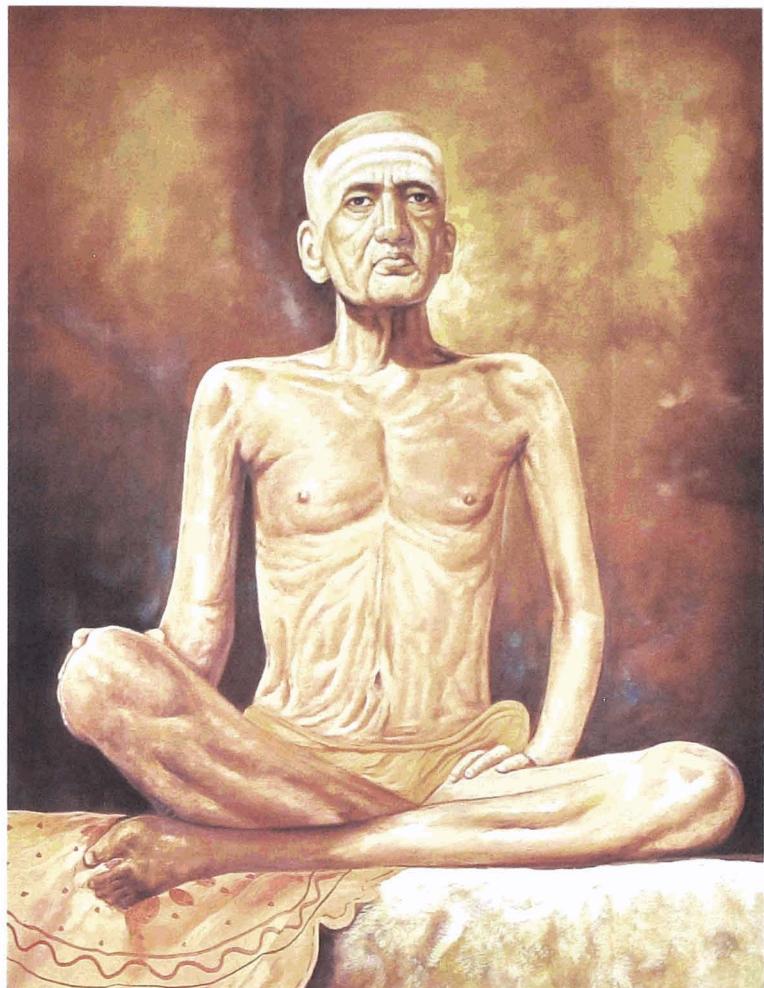
Mountain ranges in
the south-east of
Koteswar peak.

there is no danger of a mishap. But it takes time to get used to such occurrences. That is why hiring an experienced and trustworthy guide is a must in these areas. One should be prepared for sudden deterioration of weather. In the summers sometimes sudden storms occur which are also accompanied by heavy hail.

The author stayed for several days in Sundarvan alone. Between 1952 and 1955 he lived there with his Guru Tapovanam Maharaj. Guruji used to live and meditate in a small old tent. The author used to take shelter in a nearby cave. Fire was lit with dalli roots to make tea etc. The bed was made of grass and Bhoj leaves with a blanket serving as a covering at night. Wood for burning had to be brought on the back. It was mixed with grass and moss to produce a *dhumi*. When thirsty, we used to drink a concoction of black pepper and dry ginger. Small quantities of food had to be prepared twice a day. Gurudev used to leave for his trek every morning and return by evening when he would sit in the tent and write. He generally remained silent and preferred to communicate through signs. For hours he would sit outside the tent looking at the valley or the peaks. The modern disease of getting bored was not prevalent then. He never did anything in a hurry. Whenever he spoke, he did so in short maxims. He remained in meditation even while awake. The sojourn of ours in Sundarvan often lasted almost a month in the summers. Occasionally the author used to go down to Gangotri to bring rations. Gurudev enjoyed meditating in solitude. Once he expressed the desire to give up his body at a place where it should become a rock on which deer could stand and scratch themselves.

Tapovan Plain

The easier way to Tapovan plains is through the new footpath or via a trail along the south bank of the Ganga. There is an ascent of over one kilometre and one has to climb the Gangotri glacier from the left of Gomukh. Tapovan is on the other side of the glacier, and one has to traverse the 3-4 km broad glacier. Across the glacier, there is an almost perpendicular ascent of 2,000 ft. Crossing the glacier is a difficult venture, underlining the importance of taking a guide. Generally people lose their way on the glacier itself and are unable to get back on the right track till the evening. Giant rocks, some of them broken, sand and stones lie



*The author's Guru,
Swami Tapovanam Maharaj –
a day before his maha-nirvana.*

An uplifting yet indescribable illumination and fragrance filled the entire kuti at the time he breathed his last. (Pic above based on a black-and-white photo shot with an Agfa Clack, January 15, 1957).



Shivlinga peak (right) and Meru peak (left). Like the many faces of the Himalaya, everything in the mountains has many dimensions and uses. Behind this camp at Sundarvan (ht 17,000 ft) is a chilka – an alcove made by shepherds with piled up stones, for new born lambs. Mountaineers too take shelter and cook food in such chilkas, especially when strong winds are blowing.

scattered on the glacier. At places there are crevasses and giant wells. To avoid them, one has to make a new track almost every day. It is safer to cross the glacier in the mornings. In the afternoon the weather worsens. As soon as the sun, the only source of warmth, disappears behind the clouds the weather changes and it becomes biting cold. There is no shelter on the glacier, and if one is tired, the difficulties increase. One has to take several precautions to cross the glaciers and snow fields otherwise it can prove disastrous. For instance, a landmark which appears to be 1 to 2 kms away, may actually turn out to be at a distance of 7 to 8 kms.

One gets an extraordinary view of Shivlinga peak from Tapovan. A stream called Shiva Ganga, whose water can be used for drinking and cooking, flows through the plain. This stream freezes in winter. On both sides of the stream are caves, and some of them have been appropriated by sadhus. Tourists use the remaining caves as night shelters. These days many domestic tourists as well as those from abroad set up their own tents and live in them. There are no trees here. There used to be a shrub which was used as fuel. It is now nearly extinct. Surprisingly, Thelu bushes still grow in the narrow valley behind Shivlinga peak and also in the valley across Meru glacier, and the forests here are pretty dense.

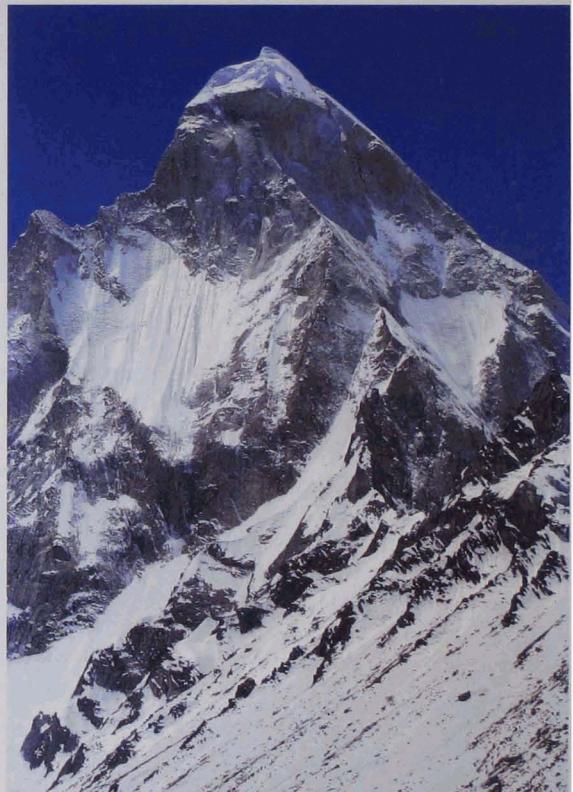
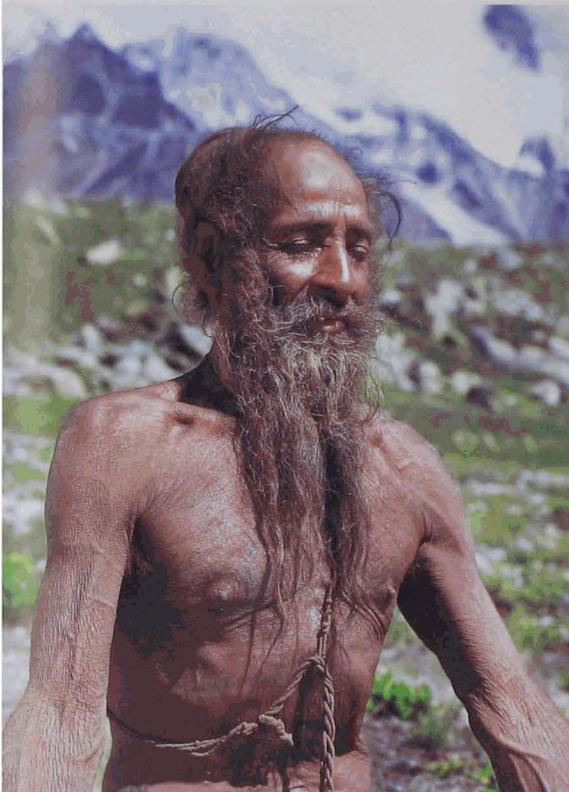
Tourism and the frequency of porters and labourers on these heights have brought in their wake problems of filth and sewage. In such cold conditions the bacteria cannot remain active and thus human excrement doesn't decay.

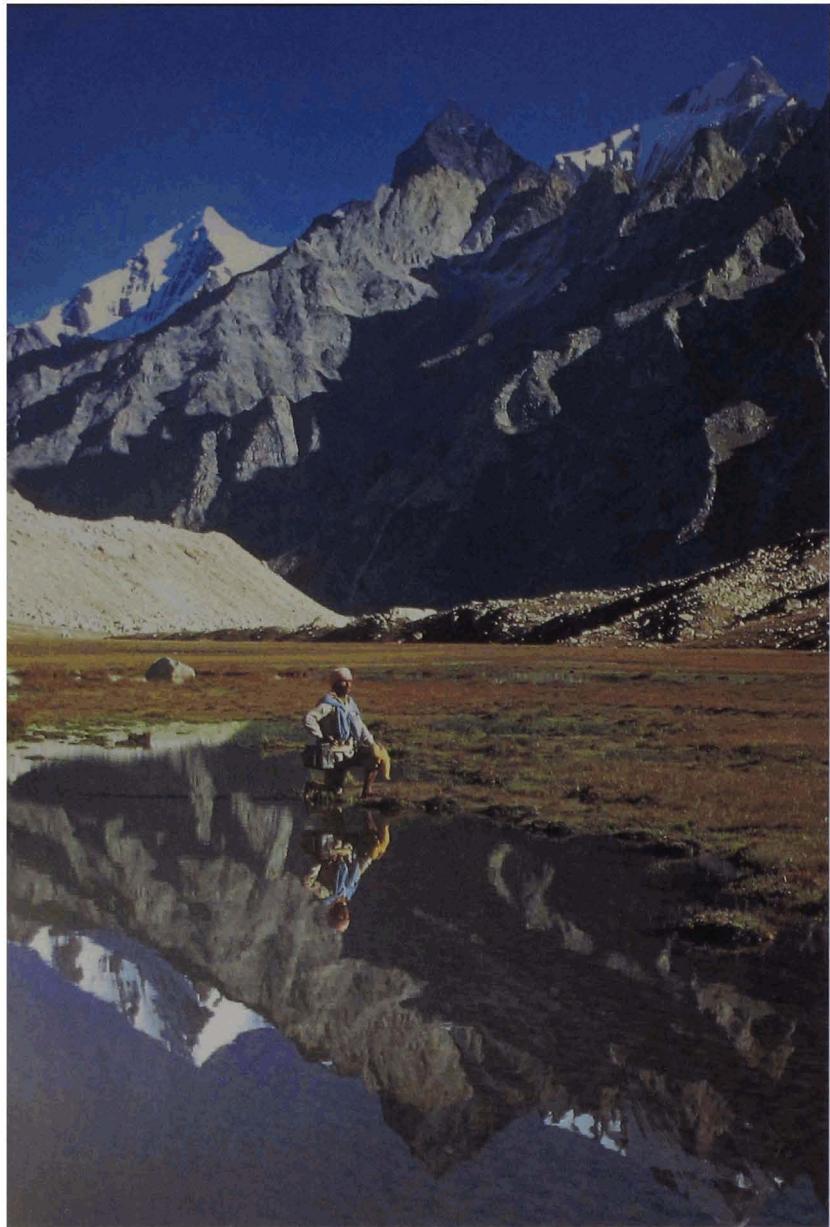


Tapovan. Finding a plain of this vastness in the Himalaya at this height (14,500 ft) is most unusual.

An ascetic, Vishnu Das,
who perished in a blizzard at Tapovan (pic 1972).

Shivalinga peak (ht 22,000 ft) viewed from Sundarvan.





Sudarshan and Matri peaks seem to perform a somersault in the lake at Tapovan. The lake is now no more (pic 1966).

FACING PAGE:

Bharat-kunna peak (left) and Meru peak (right) from the final camping site of an expedition to Kedardoom peak (pic 1965).

One sadhu is running a sort of commercial hotel which can accommodate over 400 people. He is responsible for spoiling the environment of Tapovan. Once Tapovan was a green area with lots of shrubs and herbs. But now it is beginning to become barren. There was also a lake here which has now dried up.

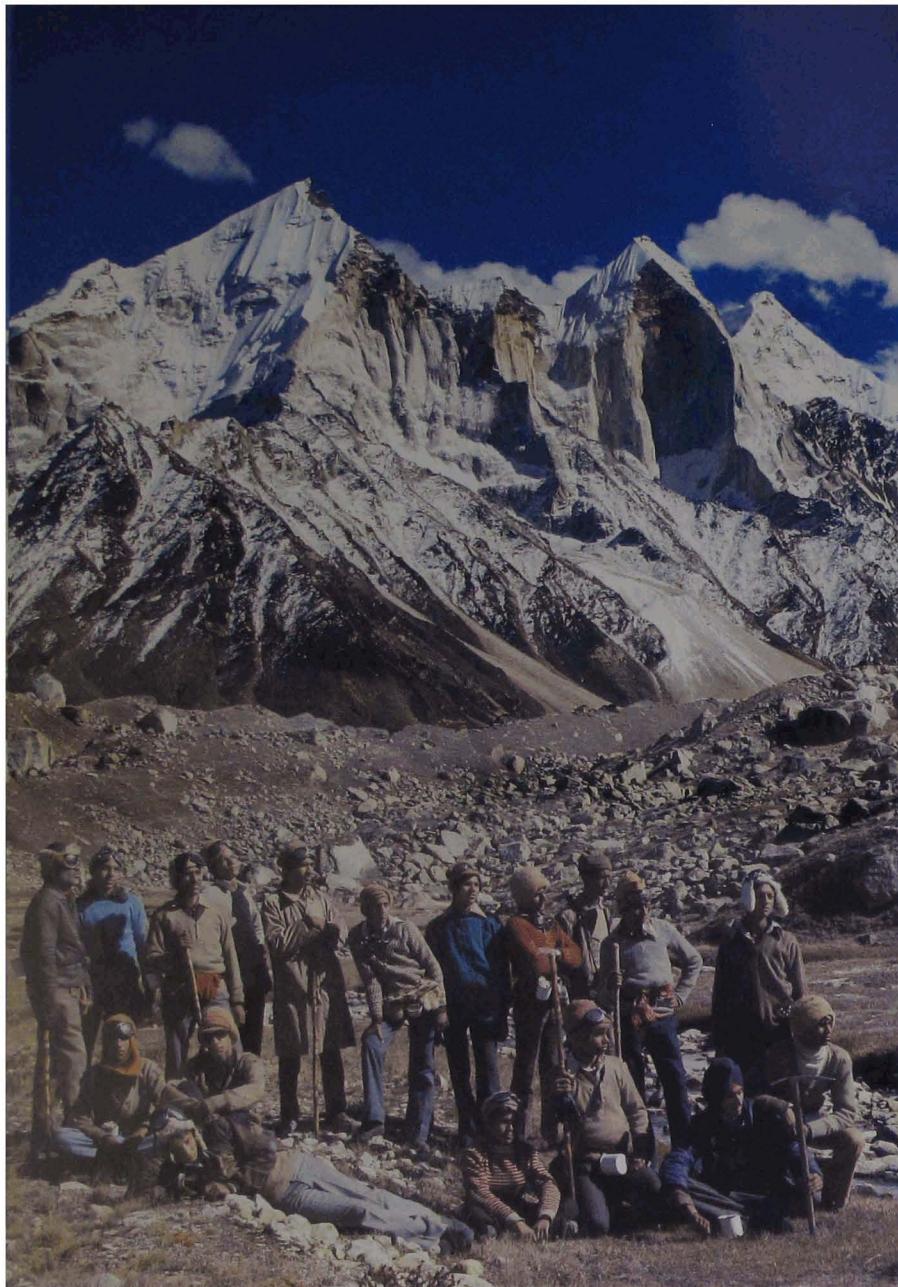
Climbing from Gomukh along the left bank of the Ganga and the Gangotri glacier, one comes across the Raktavarna (red coloured) river. It takes its name from the red soil in its waters and the red stones it carries. The valley of the Raktavarna river becomes green in summer. This valley boasts of a bird, munal, which is even more beautiful than a peacock and has now become rare. It has a shining plume on its head and is speckled blue in colour. Its feathers have pink dots. Deer are also found here. There used to be a big lake in the valley, which has now dried up. The dead lake's area is still recognizable. Deer frolic in its mud and sand. One has to live in the valley for a few days to be blessed with such sights. Further up the left bank of the river, at about 21,000 ft, there is a 'confluence' of about 20 to 25 glaciers, many of them originating from the surrounding mountain peaks.

Shepherds have been barred from these heights now. But they used to be here earlier – a fact which is clear from the still existent small *chilkas* (alcoves) built in the valley to keep and protect lambs. These alcoves were built with stones loosely kept

one over the other in a circle. Newborn lambs were kept in these alcoves as they could not accompany their mothers for grazing on the mountains. The flock of sheep returned at night to sheep pens where shepherd dogs protected them. The alcoves have been built at safe places near some source of water. Now, these alcoves provide shelter from high winds to sadhus and tourists. They are also used as camp kitchens when gusty winds prevent cooking in the open.

The author was invited in 1960 by some shepherds to come and live with them and share their milk and curd. The journey began from Gangotri in the afternoon, which was a big mistake. It became dark near Gomukh. Since the author was familiar with the valley having visited it two or three times, he kept climbing the rocks in spite of the cold and darkness. It took him several hours to reach the valley of Chaturangi mountain range at about 10 p.m. Fresh sheep droppings lying there led to the discovery of one *chilka*. The shepherds however





An expedition of school children led by the author in 1964, at Tapovan. In the background is Bhagirath mountain.

had abandoned the camp and gone elsewhere. With no other shelter to spend the night, the author lay down in the alcove in a yogic posture to ward off cold, and pulled over himself the dry grass lying about. It was extremely uncomfortable but his life was saved. In the mountains one should begin one's journey before daybreak, particularly when climbing glaciers. Safety lies in reaching your destination by afternoon and setting up camp at some safe site.

Guiding Mountaineers

Before this incident, the author had taken a group of students from Roorkee Engineering College for an expedition to the Koteswar peak above the Raktavarna valley. He had climbed this peak in 1976 along with trainees from the Nehru Mountaineering Institute. Some of the college students turned out to be indisciplined and weak-hearted. They started wailing during the climb and insisted on returning. These few students put the entire team at peril. Ultimately, they were tied together with a rope and their will power was boosted to bring them down safely. Untrained youth should not be taken on higher mountains and the selection of the team should be done judiciously.

The author used to teach yoga to students of Pilani Public School and

used to take them on mountain and forest expeditions. In 1964 he led a team of students on an expedition to Meru valley. In those days, there was no road ahead of Dharasu. The 110 kms to Gomukh had to be traversed on foot via the pedestrian trail. The base camp was set up at Gomukh. Of the 14 young men, seven developed fright while covering Gangotri glacier. They were turned back, and the author took the remaining students to the mouth of Meru glacier. There the altimetre showed the height to be 18,000 ft. On the way back there was an accident. One student nearly drowned when trying to walk on the thin ice of a frozen lake. The ice cracked under his weight. Somehow he was saved. His wet clothes were removed and he was given some of the author's clothes to wear. That day, on the way back we could not cross the Gangotri glacier. Since it is



very dangerous to traverse the glaciers at night, we climbed down to the southern bank of the Ganga and set up our camp. The whole night was spent in front of a campfire.

Gomukh to Badrinath

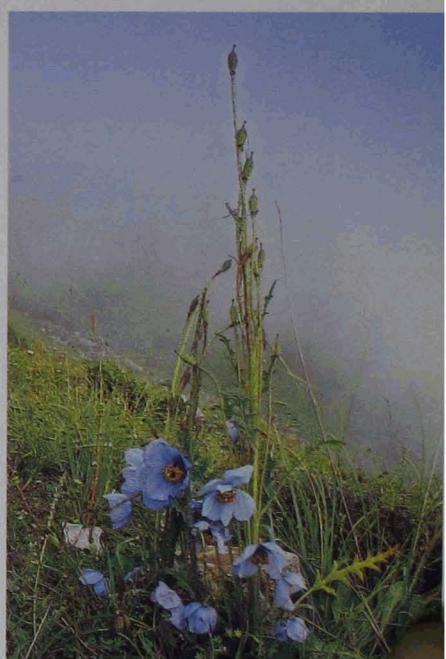
The Gomukh to Badrinath route is at a high altitude and very long. On the way lie innumerable glaciers, valleys and difficult passes. This route is called Dev Marg. In the last 30 years, very few people have travelled on this route. In July-August of 1963, the author went on this route with a troop of 30 soldiers. The Army had requested him to act as a guide for them. The total climb and descent is more than 50 kms. After crossing the Kalindi Pass from Nandanvan one reaches Arva glacier. This climb is not only difficult, the entire region is also full of perils. The camp sites had to be selected with great care to avoid mishaps. Travelling from Arva glacier to Musa Pani and from there to Ghastoli, the team reached Badrinath on the seventh day. On the way lie Sundar glacier, Vasuki glacier, Vasuki valley and Vasuki peak. A camp was set up on the Chaturangi glacier beyond Vasuki glacier. The team got caught in a snowstorm on the way down from Kalindi Pass (19,510 ft). It became totally dark at three in the afternoon. It was difficult to see or to hear each other. By God's grace the storm ceased after half an hour and the team proceeded safely.

The Author Buys His First Box Camera

The author had travelled on the Gomukh-Badrinath route for the first time in 1955 with the blessings and inspiration received from his Guru. One companion

A group led by the author in 1977,
on its way to Koteswar peak
(ht 21,000 ft).

Blue poppies spotted
at a height of 18,000 ft.





The 'well of death' into which the author fell while descending from Kalindi Pass. He was pulled out with the help of a rope, after a struggle of nearly two hours. His clothes were torn and his body was bleeding. He did not forget to click the 'well of death' on his next trip to the same place. The ordeal freed him from 'fear of death'.

FACING PAGE:
Deceptive beauty: one false step, and
you are trapped. Giant crevasses below
the Kalindi peak.

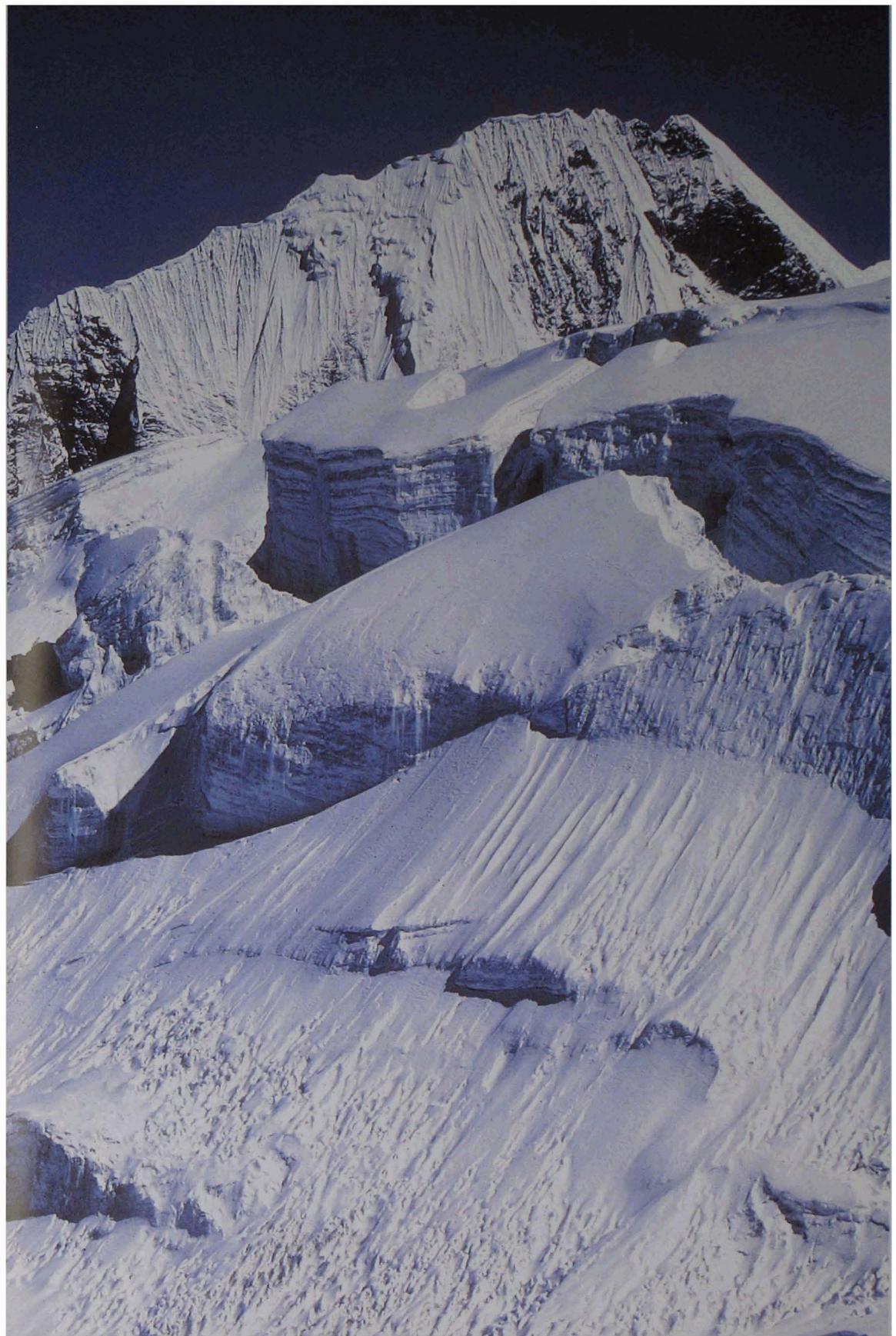
and five coolies accompanied him. During the climb, the author fell into a crevasse at the Kalindi Pass and got trapped inside. Only his head remained outside. After a struggle of one and a half hours he was pulled out with the help of a rope. The companion took photographs of the author's encounter with Death, but never sent prints to him in spite of his promise. After this the author himself bought a box camera and started taking photographs. He travelled several times on this Dev Marg. In 1956, he guided 14 sadhus and some householders from Gangotri to Badrinath via the Kalindi Pass, and brought them back by the same route. Before that no one had ventured to return by this route because of the hazardous nature of this track. When our team returned to Gangotri we were welcomed by the Gangotri people with the beating of drums and music. After that the author made ten more trips on this route.

Receding of Gomukh

Several glaciers descending from the adjoining peaks come together to join the Gangotri glacier. All these glaciers contribute their water to the flow of the Ganga. Today, all glaciers in the Himalaya, including Gomukh, are receding and melting fast. Among the peaks from where the glaciers and rivers descend to form the Ganga are Sudarshan, Matri, Cheedvasa, Koteswar, Shvetvarna, Shri

Kailash, Dev Dang, Mana, Parvati, Neelambar, Raktavarna, Chaturangi, Kalindi, Chandra Parvat, Sita Parvat, Suralaya, Satopanth, Sundar, Vasuki, Bhagirath, Bhagirath Kharak, Swachhand, Mandani, Maindi, Chaukhamba, Sumeru, Gahan, Mahalaya, Kharchkund, Kedar Doom, Kedar, Kirti, Bharat-kunna, Shivlinga, Vasishtha, Manda, Bhrigu, Bhrigupanth, Thalaisagar, Jogen, Patangani Dhar, Gangotri-1, 2, 3, Rudra Himalaya, Mainaki, Shrikhand, Mala, Awana etc.

The glaciers on the opposite side of these peaks descend to form rivers like Alaknanda, Mandakini, Bhilangana and Pilku. However the valleys of these rivers are different from each other and so is the way to reach them. The flow of Ganga water has been referred to as a manifestation of God's will in the holy books. That is why the Ganga is worshipped all the way from its source at Gomukh to Gangasagar where it merges into the sea. Geologists and mountaineers the world over consider the Gangotri glacier area unique partly because of the unusual concentration of high peaks found here. ♡





Vasuki, Bhagirath I and III peaks.

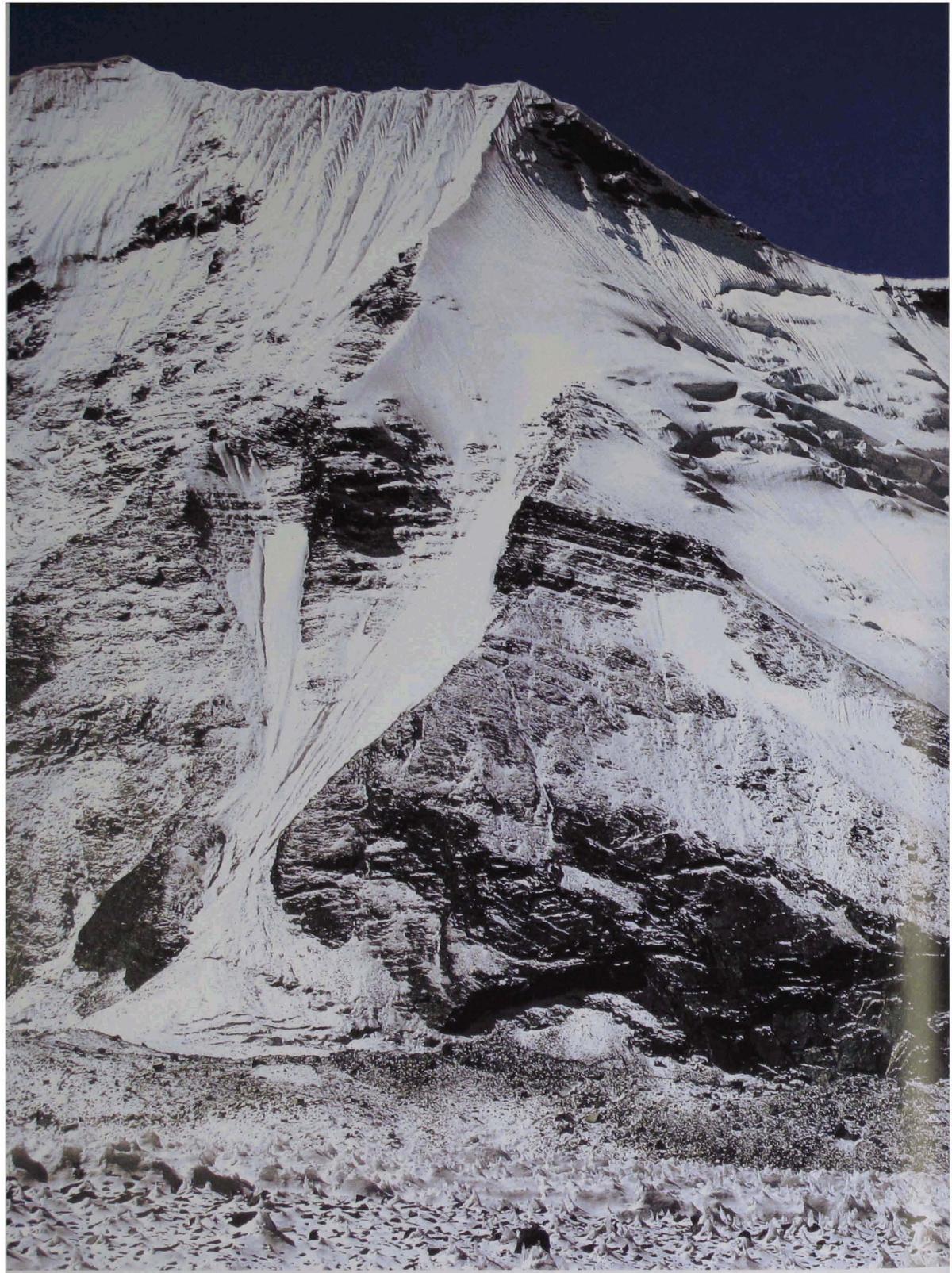
FACING PAGE:
TOP: Shri Kailash peak (left) –
conquered for the first time
in 1999 – as viewed from
Koteswar peak.

BOTTOM: A new day begins at
Chandra mountain.

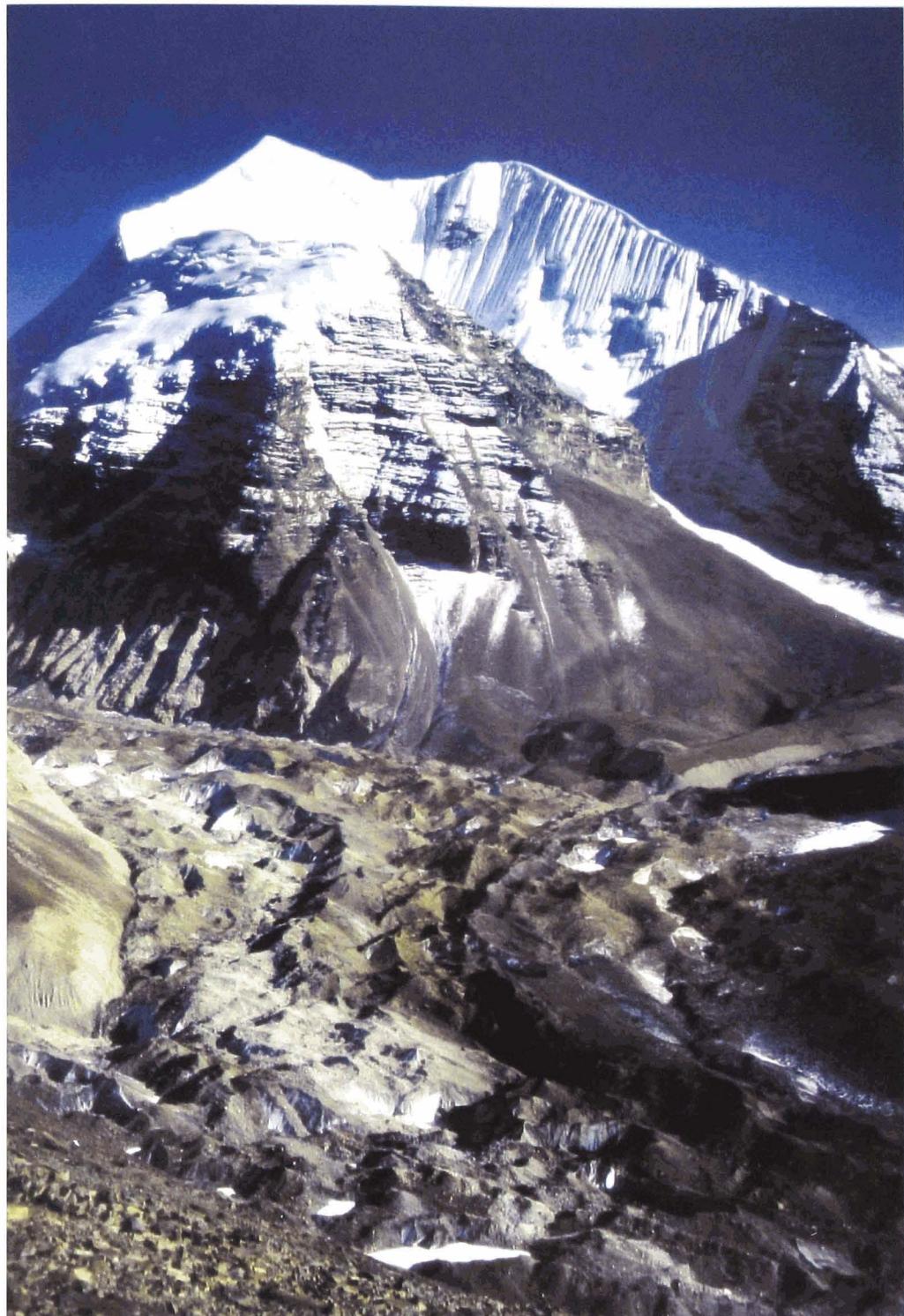
Gangotri glacier is receding
every year, and so is Gomukh.
On the left of the Gangotri
glacier is the Tapovan ridge
(pic 1962).



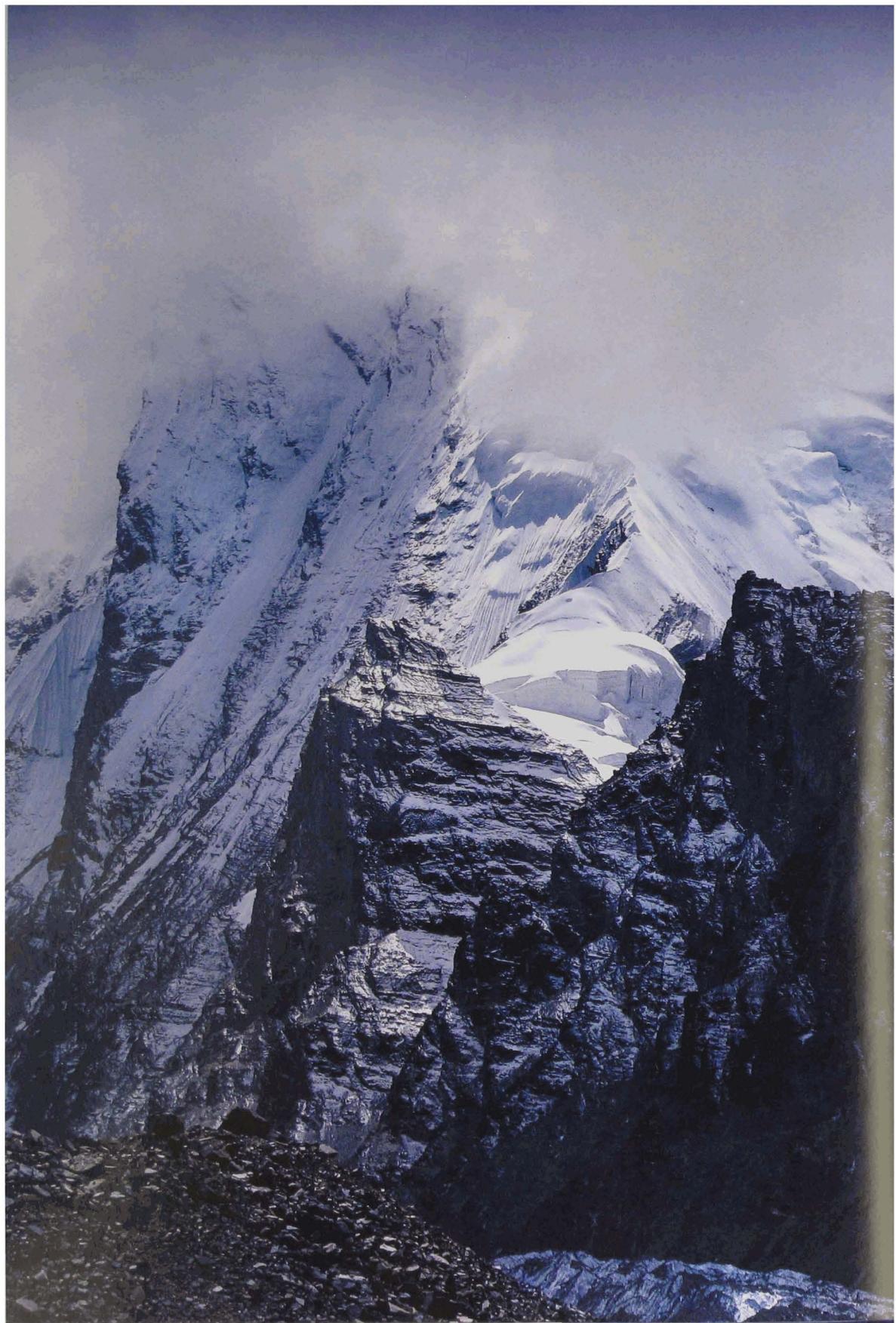




Chandra mountain (ht 22,500 ft) is at the edge of Chaturangi valley. This mountain, in the inner Himalaya, is inaccessible in winters and during bad weather. Frequent avalanches slide down its middle.



A distant view of Chandra mountain.





Pygmies before the gigantic Satopanth peak: mountaineers camping in Suralaya valley.



Mount Draupadi Danda

FACING PAGE: Satopanth peak, a perpetual playground for clouds (ht 22,000 ft).



An icy wonder:
Do 'u' see?
How can such a slender ice column
support such a massive rock?

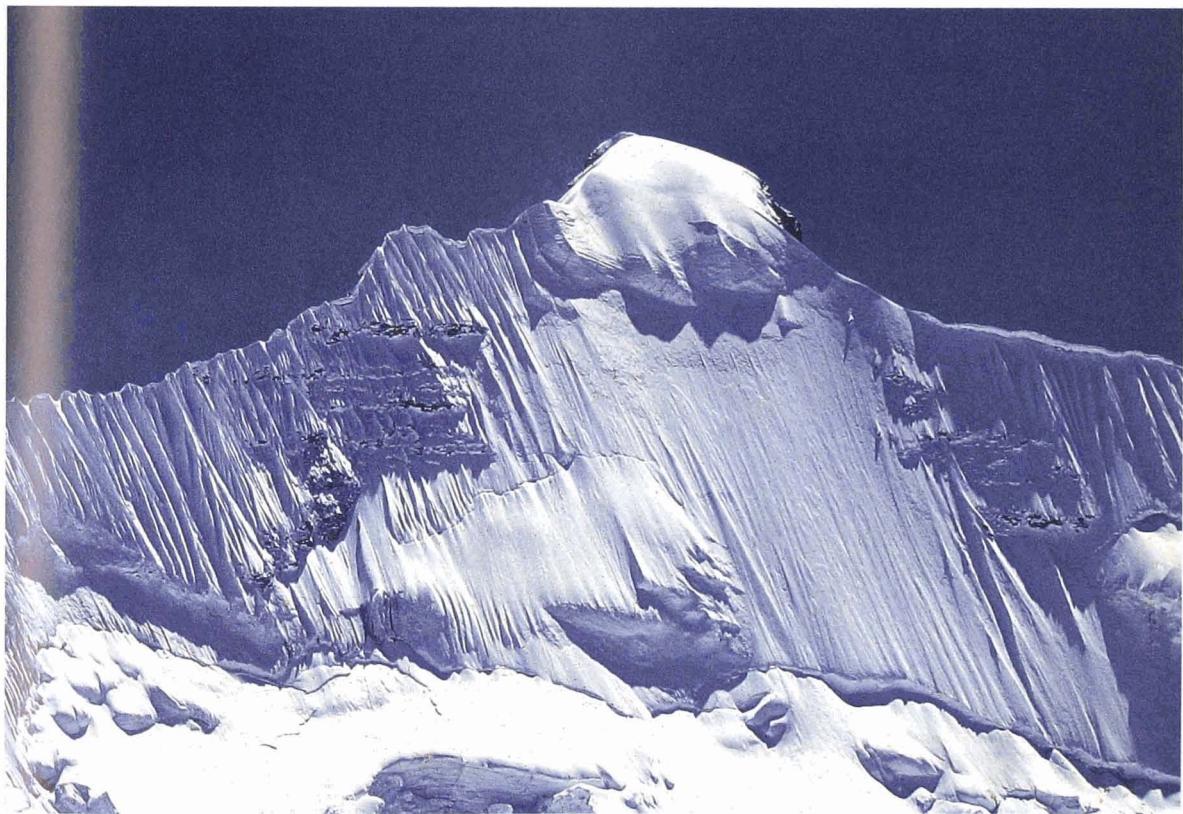
FACING PAGE:

TOP: Mountain ranges seen from the Suralaya valley. Three glaciers, Chandra, Suralaya and Satopanth merge here. In the foreground are rock tables balanced over ice pedestals.

BOTTOM: Dangerous snow tunnels in Suralaya glacier. Even the most well-equipped mountaineers find them daunting. The ice blades are so sharp they can cause grievous injury.



Suralaya peak wearing an enigmatic face mask.



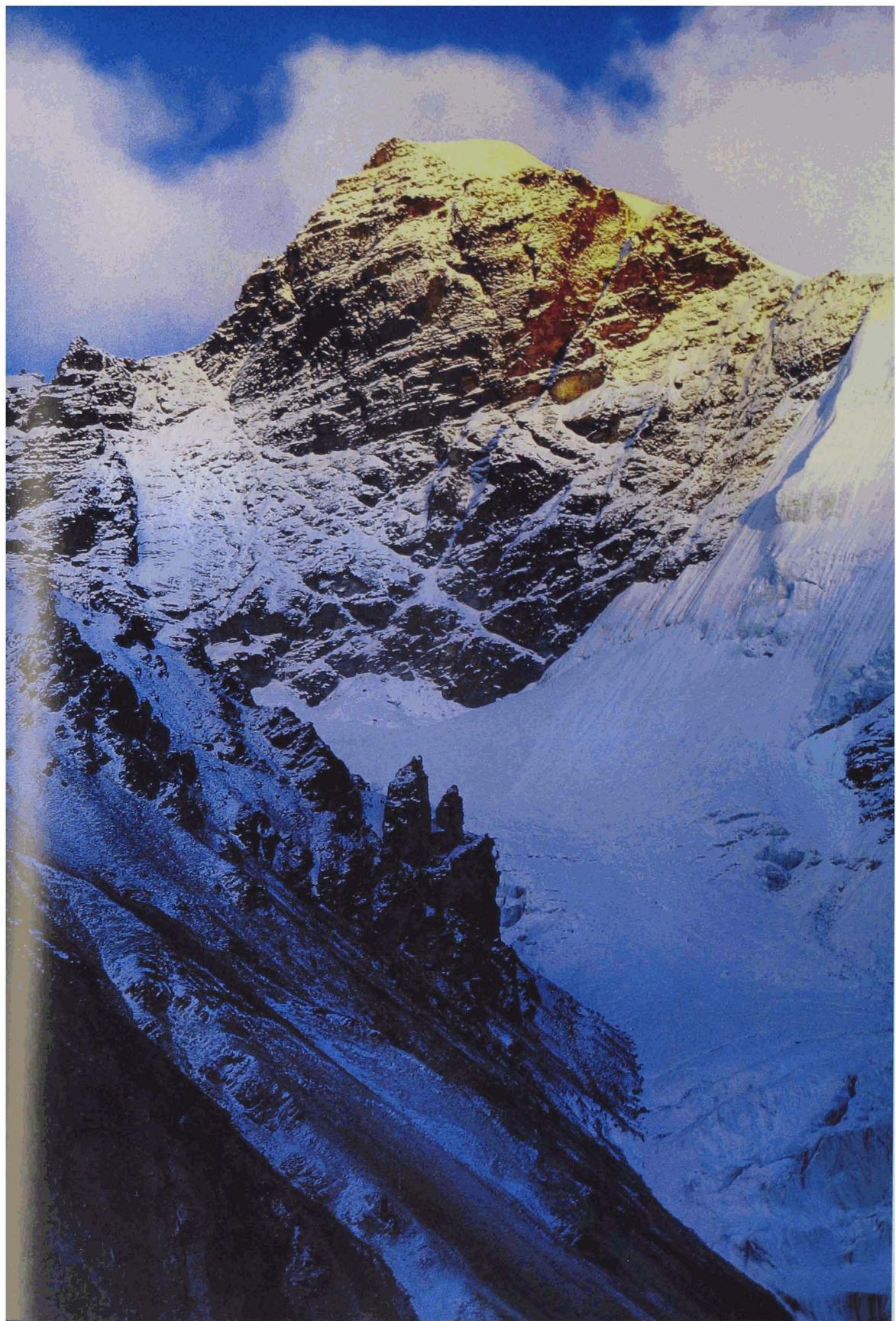


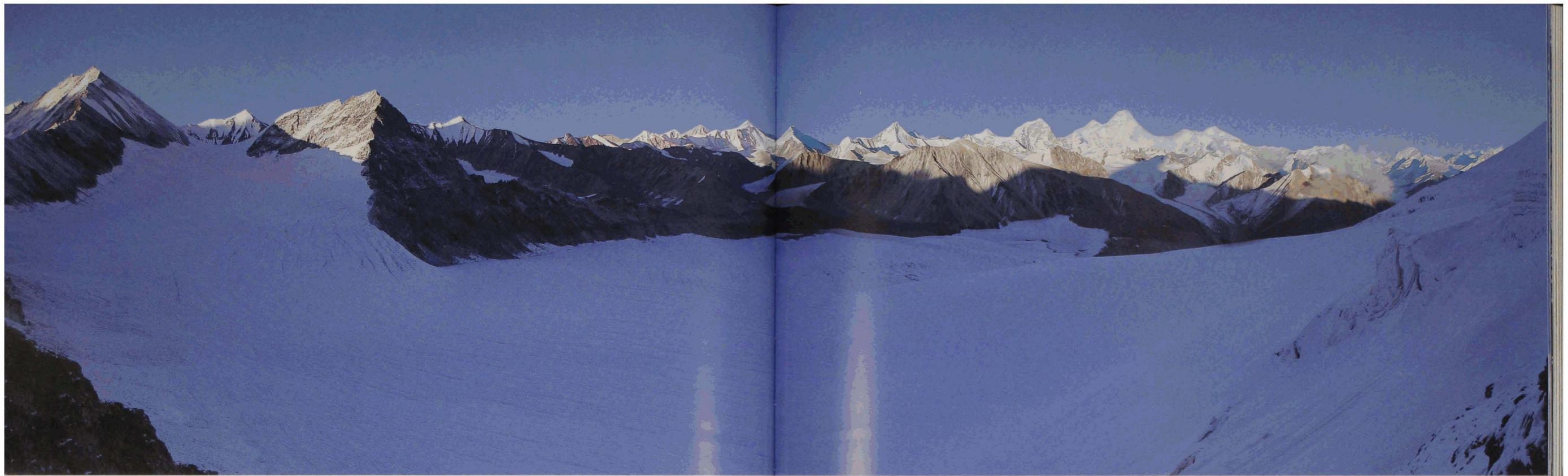
Sita mountain range (ht 21,000 ft) in technicolour as seen from the Chaturangi glacier.



Sita glacier and peak viewed from the Chaturangi valley. On a clear, sunny day the dazzling brightness here can burn the naked eye. In the foreground are seracs - pinnacles or ridges of ice on the surface of a glacier where crevasses intersect.

FACING PAGE:
A mountain
heading
heavenwards
from its home in the
Chaturangi glacier.
It bears a striking
resemblance to
mount Everest, but
has still not been
christened.





A rolling panoramic vista of Himalayan ranges at sunrise photographed from the top of Kalindi Rocky peak. Together, they extend over 125 kilometres and are distinguished by peaks such as Tara, Arwa, Raktakunna, Ghastoli, Saraswati, Mukut, Kuber Bhandar and Hathi Parbat. At right in the foreground is the ascent to Kalindi Ice peak (pic 1963).

Manda peak (ht 21,000 ft) from Cheedvasa on the Gangotri-Gomukh road.



Flower power: together we can brave the endless sea of snow.





Proceed with care: clouds sounding an ominous warning to mountaineers just before a pass adjoining Kalindi mountain (22,000 ft.). Within minutes of the sun disappearing, the temperature plummets by 10-12° C. Safety lies in setting up a camp quickly (pic 1981).

FACING PAGE:
Snow, snow and snow...
surrounding Kalindi pass.

NEXT SPREAD:
Sun rays waking up
the sleeping Kalindi mountain
with a gentle kiss.

A virtual death trap garbed in
tempting, virgin white snow –
on the way to Kalindi Ice peak.









Faster and faster:
an avalanche streaks down the Kalindi mountain.
Going close to the base is an irrevocable invitation to disaster.



Clouds playing in the lap of the mountains. View of the northerly peaks from Kalindi pass. Beyond these peaks lies Tibet.

FACING PAGE:
TOP: Beauty and the beast: dark ruggedness and fair velvety softness. Mukut peak while climbing down from Arva valley to Raktakunna (Mana) Pass.

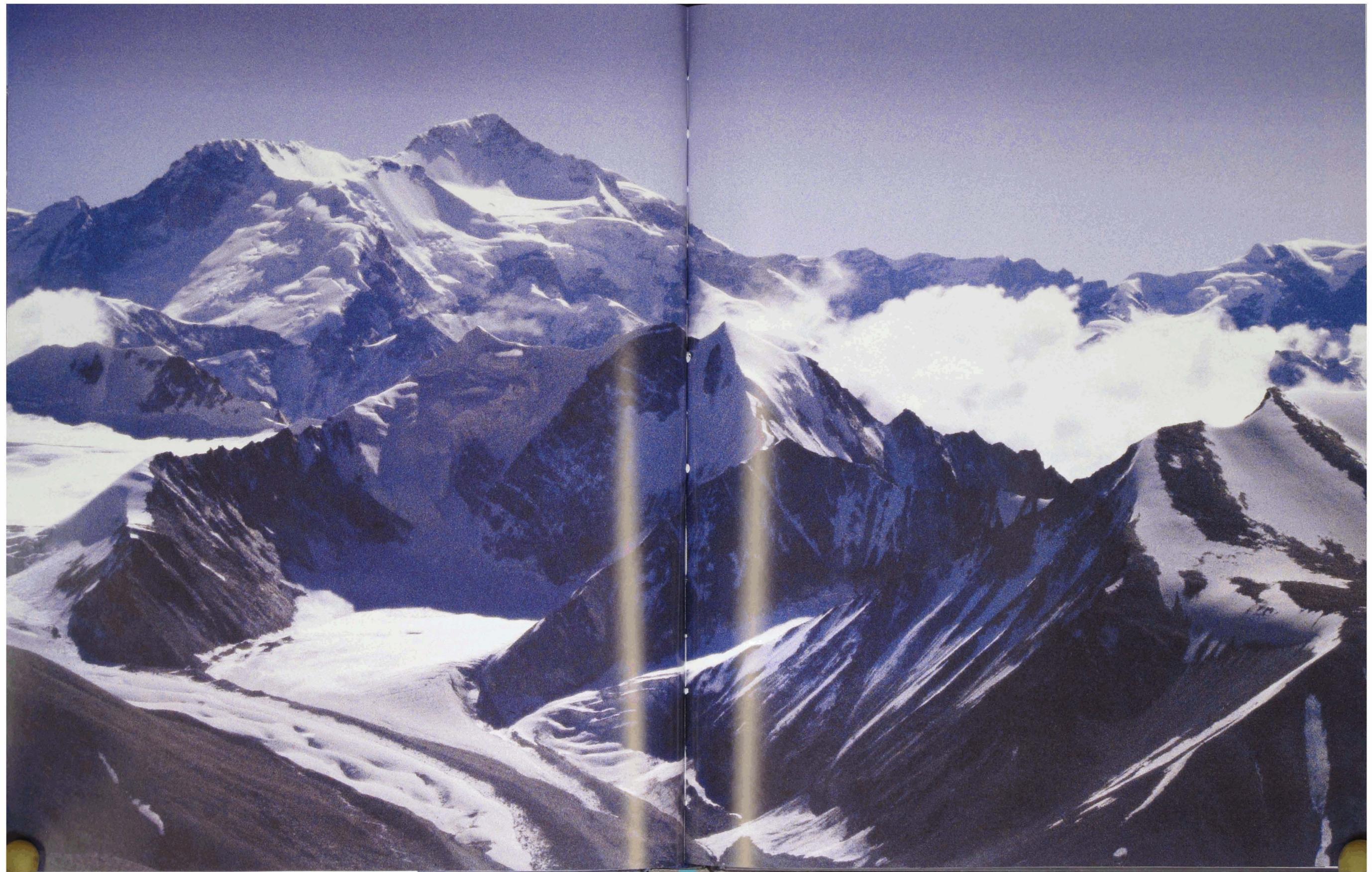
BOTTOM: Sentinels of the snows. Saraswati and Raktakunna peaks form a part of Gandha-Mardan mountain ranges.

NEXT SPREAD:
Surrealistic landscape: did the moon take inspiration from the Himalaya, or vice versa? Kamet (right) and Mukut peak (left).

Rocks of ice form a gateway for expedition members on the way to dangerous Baljori peak (ht 21,000 ft) in Nandadevi Ring.



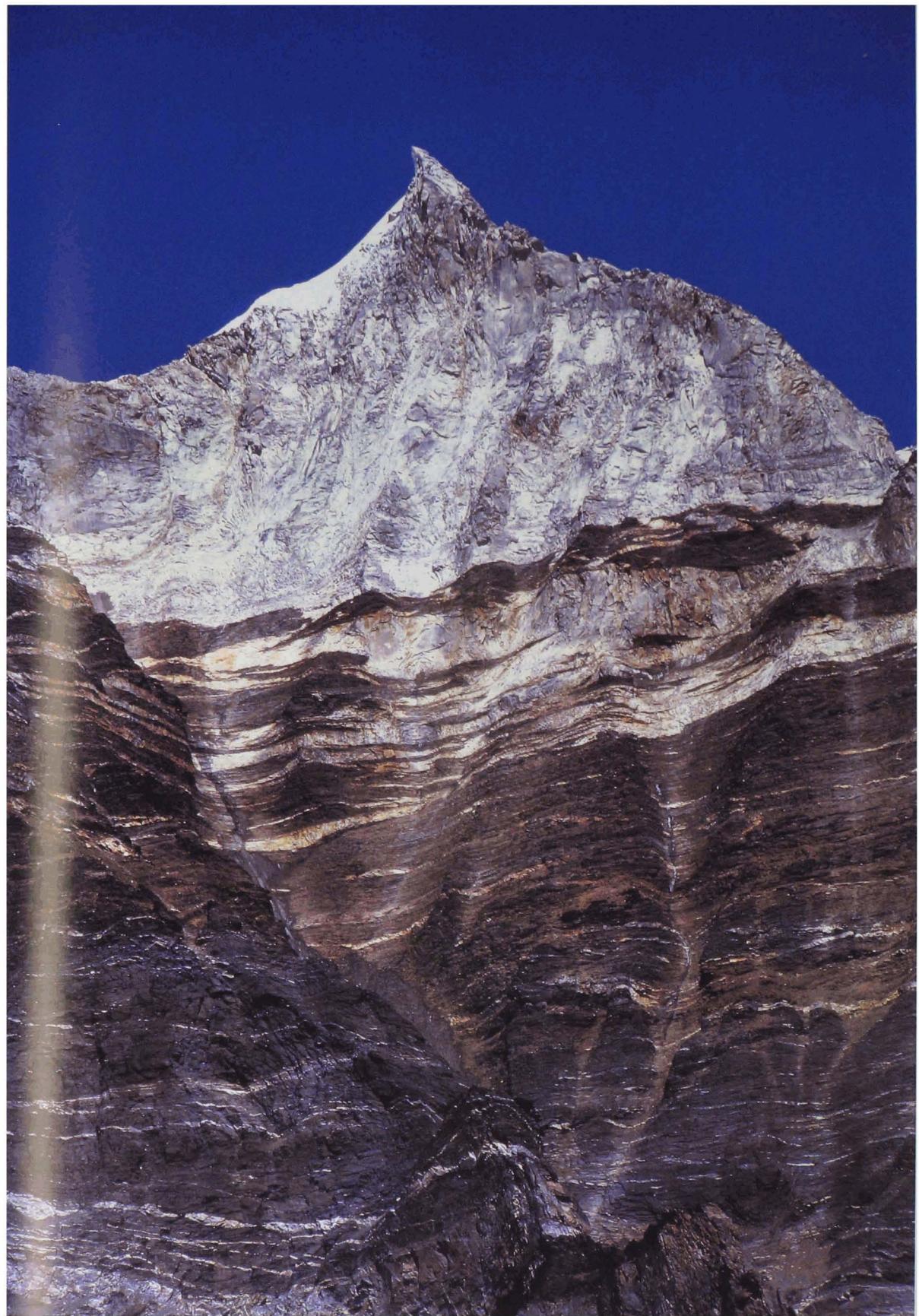






The sun surrounded by a spectrum of colours above Kharch Kund mountain.
The dispersion effect was achieved through a special filter.

FACING PAGE: Is this how the disappearing vultures of the world will get fossilized? Bhagirath-I seen from Gangotri glacier.



A glacial lake dies,
vegetation is born.
Base of mount Bhagirath-3
(ht 18,000 ft).

FACING PAGE:

TOP: A rendezvous of glaciers
(ht 18,500 ft) below Bhagirath
mountain range.

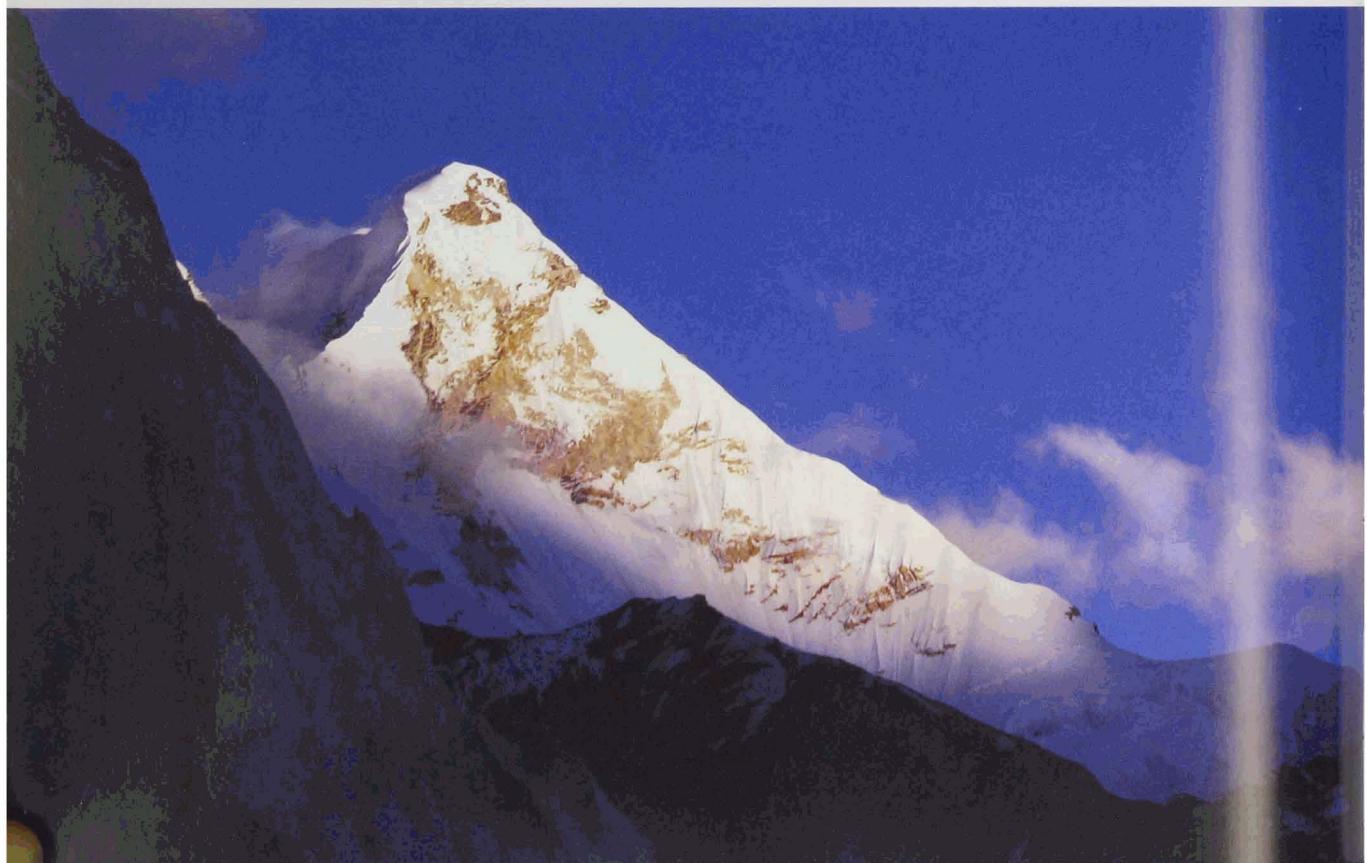
BOTTOM: A mountain range in
relief. The prominent peaks are
Bhagirath, Swachhand, Mandani and
Maindi (ht 21000 – 22000 ft).

NEXT SPREAD:

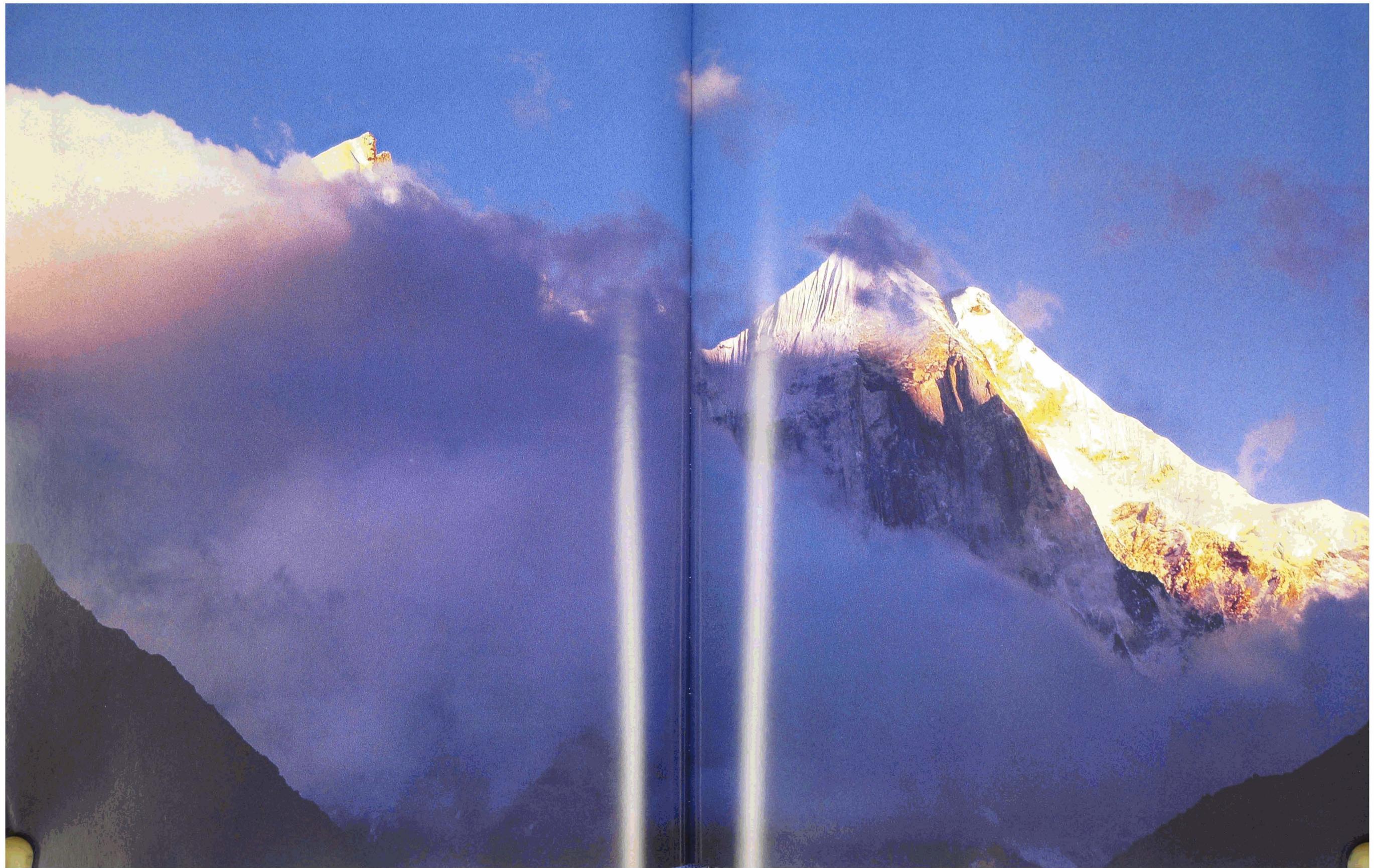
Thunder clouds attempt to veil the
face of mount Bhagirath.

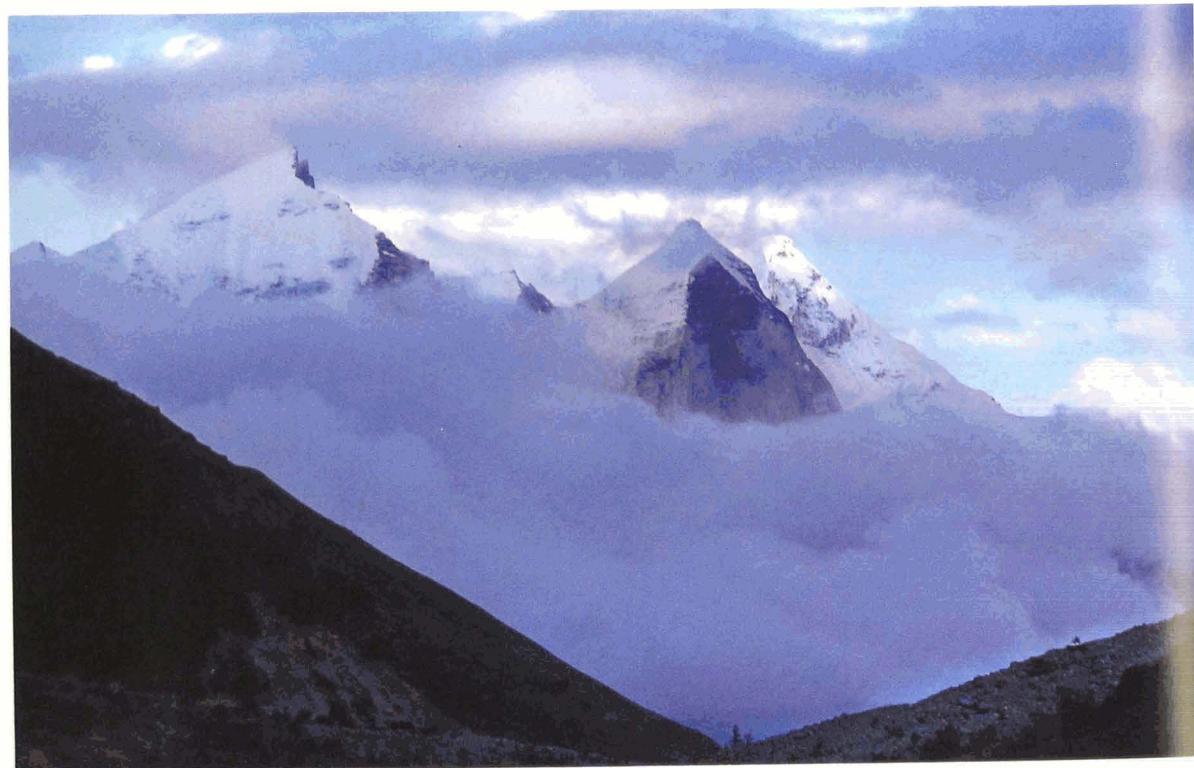
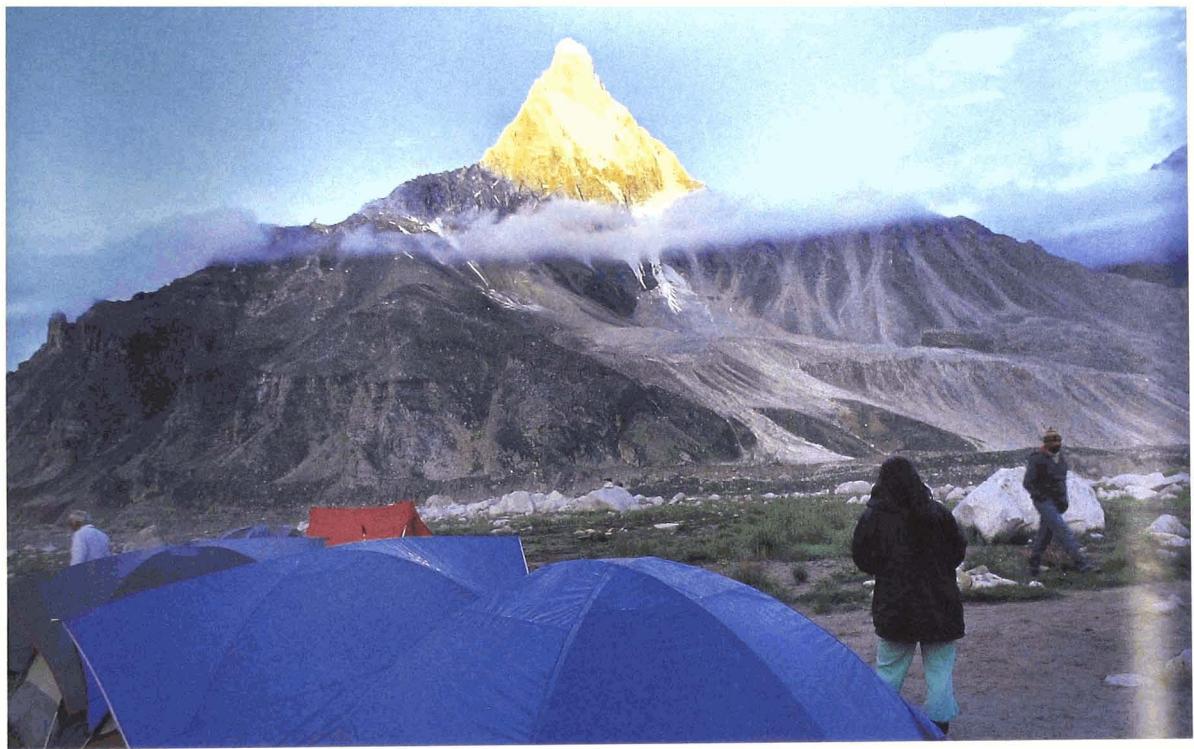


The mountainside tries to shake
off the ice. Bhagirath-3 peak
(ht 23,000 ft).









Tug-of-war in the Bhrigupanth range, as witnessed from Devdang: obviously the invisible party is winning.

FACING PAGE:

TOP: Shivalinga peak – a beacon for the faithful.

Circumambulating the Shivalinga's base (12-15 kms) is unusually arduous and time consuming.

BOTTOM: Bhagirath peaks peeping out of the clouds.

NEXT SPREAD:

Even the rocks in the Himalaya seem to have faith in the transcendental powers of 'Aum'.

Vegetation at 20,000 ft is as rare as the mystic mossy 35 below Sumeru peak.



In the higher regions of Gangotri glacier, is he trying to reach a hidden treasure through this underground passage?





The Sumeru range in a sombre mood. Are they guarding a treasure? According to popular belief, there are deposits of gold in these mountains.

FACING PAGE:

TOP: Sumeru mountain with a make-up of soft white snow, as seen while going round Gangotri glacier.

BOTTOM: Clouds and mountains in divine communion. Sunderdunga mountain of Kumaon Himalaya.



The eight channeled river of ice and boulders takes a graceful turn. Here, below Chaukhamba peak, Gangotri glacier is 3 to 4 kms broad.



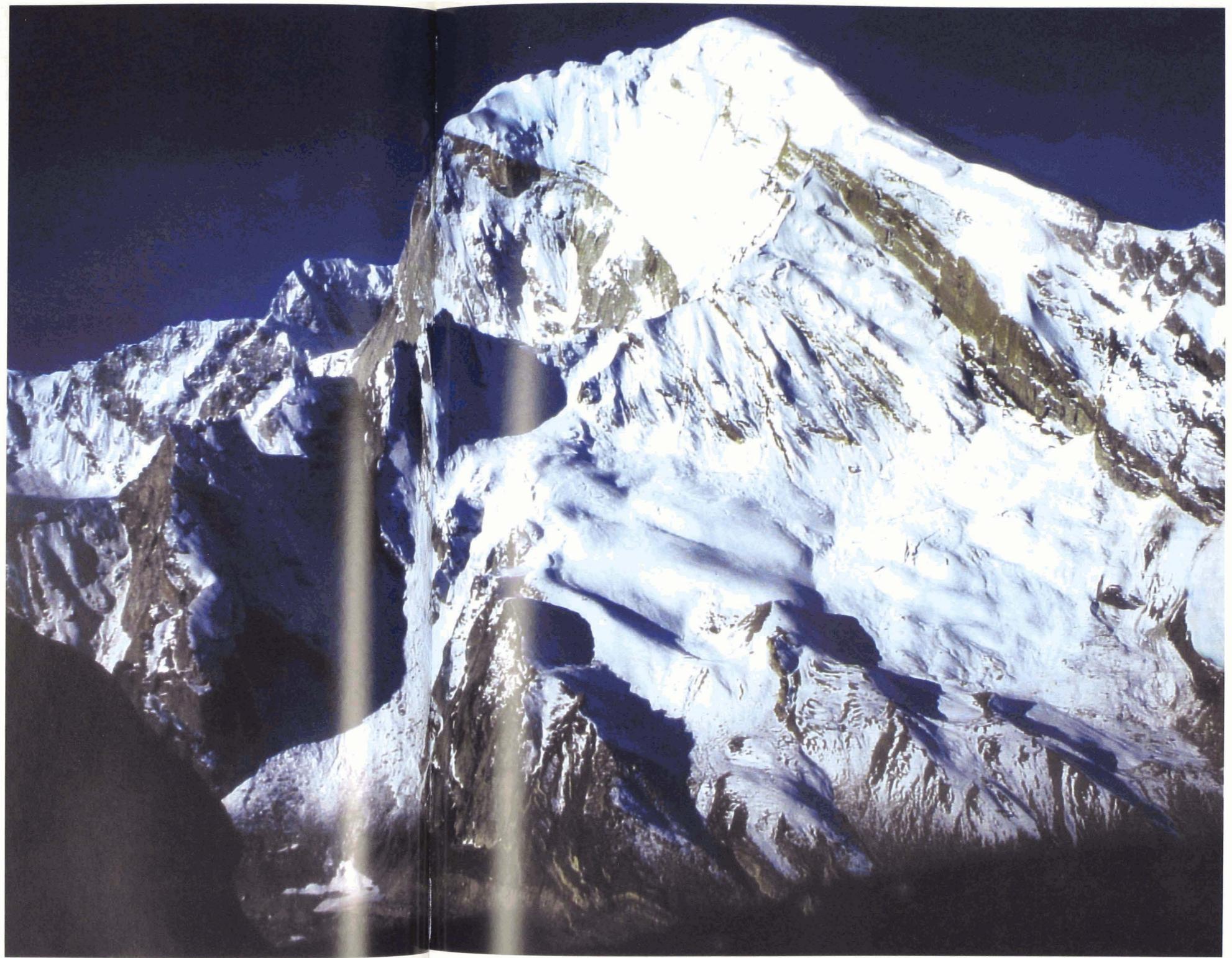


Kedar Valley and Yonder

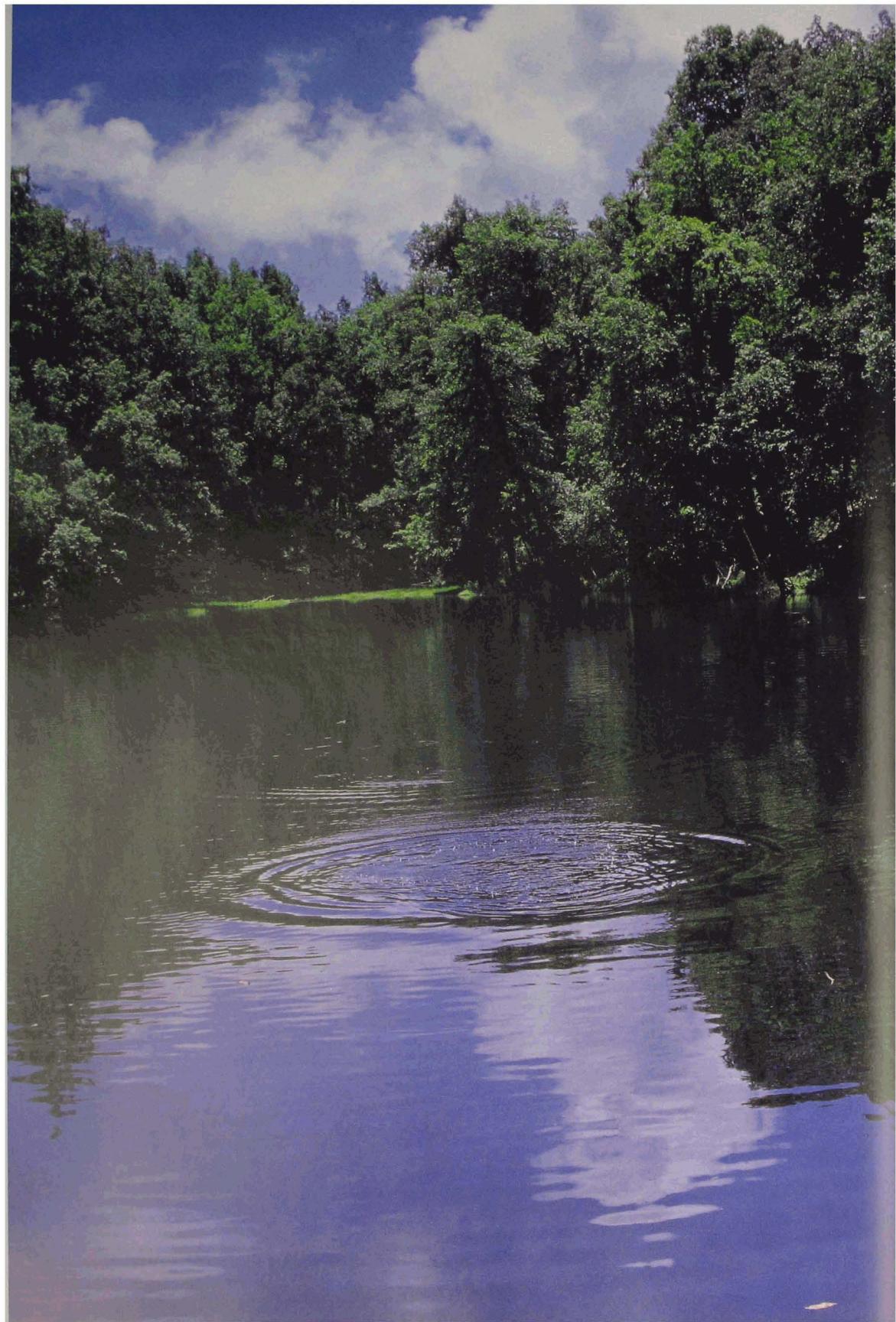
There is a place called Bhatwari about 30 kms above Uttarkashi. Ancient holy books refer to it as Bhaskar Prayag. On its west side, after a climb of a few kilometres, there is the bugyal of Dayara. Bugyal is the local term used for sloping grasslands or meadows between mountains. A variety of interesting flora and fauna are found here. There is plenty of snow here in winters and a proposal to develop it into a skiing resort is under consideration. One gets a view of the vastness of the Himalaya from the ridge of this bugyal.

Travelling from Ganga valley to Kedar valley, one has to go through a place called Malla, beyond Bhatwari. There is a foot bridge over the Ganga here. After crossing this bridge one reaches the Pilku river. Across the Pilku lies a thick forest. The old pilgrimage route runs through this forest. Pilgrims, of course, no longer take this route and only the local people use it. This is a beautiful track and in olden times, the Tehri State maintained shelters for pilgrims here. To be of assistance to each other, the pilgrims travelled in small groups from Rishikesh. They used to carry with them medicines, necessary clothes and eatables in bundles kept on their heads. The rich among them hired coolies to carry their luggage. In spite of the difficult terrain, nobody fell sick as there were adequate halting places and shelters on the way. There were no mishaps either. The pilgrims moved along singing *bhajans* in praise of Lord Shiva. At halting places they cooked their food. They took care of the needs of the accompanying sadhus as well. These days pilgrims eat all kinds of unhygienic food at *dhabas* (wayside eateries) and often fall sick.

However, this route to Badrinath is not suitable during the rainy season. Leeches on trees in the forest fall on unwary men and animals and begin sucking their blood. They fall off only after fattening on their victim's blood, and one usually remains unaware that a leech is gorging on one's blood. If one is forced to travel on this route in the rainy season one must carry a rain coat and boiled drinking water. The track, particularly the climb, becomes slippery and unsafe.



Kedar Dome – 'I am the Lord of all I survey.'





Is this the debris of a mountain or a mountain of debris?

There are three halts on the way from Malla to Kedar Dham: Boodha Kedar, Triyugi Narayana and Gauri Kund (different from the Gauri Kund at Gangotri). Before Boodha Kedar there is the famous hard climb of Pavali Kanta. Boodha Kedar is a very beautiful place. There is a shelter and a temple here. A temple and dharamshala are at Triyugi Narayana also. Now there is a metalled road to Gauri Kund. But the place itself is very small and the valley is narrow. This results in over-crowding.

In Gauri Kund there is a hot water spring over which a bathing tank has been built. A hot water bath here is very soothing, banishing all fatigue. At Gauri Kund, Parvati is said to have meditated after having resolved to marry Lord Shiva. There is also a confluence of the Mandakini and Sone Ganga rivers here. Sone Ganga gets its water from Vasuki lake and Khatling glacier. On the other side of Khatling glacier are the sources of the rivers Pilku and Bhilangana.

According to mythology, Triyugi Narayana is the place where Lord Shiva married Parvati. It is believed that the fire still burning here dates back to a yajna performed during that period. Pilgrims donate firewood to keep the yajna fire burning.

Boodha Kedar too has its significance and is mentioned in holy books as Shatling or Khatling. To its north is a route to Khatling glacier and the valleys and mountains of Khatling range. There are dozens of lakes around Khatling glacier, the prominent ones being Brahma Taal, Narayana Taal, Pari Taal and Linga Taal. This group of lakes is called Sahasrataal (thousand lakes). These lakes are situated at heights varying from 14,000 ft to 18,000 ft. They can be reached

FACING PAGE:

Is the wheel of time churning the waters of Nachiketa Lake? Surrounded by the thick forests of Chaurangi Khal, 25 kms from Uttarkashi, many people are ensnared by its unspoilt beauty.

Flowers add a rare decorative touch to this unusual idol of Lord Ganesha at Lingaraja Temple, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.





Shrikanth peak with the Khatling glacier in the foreground.

The Khatling range – the source of Bhilangana river. Once upon a time there were more than a 100 alluring lakes hidden in the folds of these golden mountains. Sadly, many of them have dried up completely.



only by those who are of pure mind and body, with a devotional attitude. Fun-loving tourists seldom possess the perseverance to reach the lakes.

It is believed that improper conduct here invites the wrath of gods and goddesses. There have been several unfortunate incidents of this kind, later attributed to the gods displeasure. Even otherwise, the journey to these lakes is hazardous. Local villagers take their village idols in a procession to Sahasrataal where *puja* (worship) is performed ritually, with a fair being organized in June-July every year. They consider Sahasrataal area very sacred, and avoid polluting the lakes. The name of Pandit Satya Narayana Shastri is famous for his Bhagwat discourses at Sahasrataal. Facing the Himalaya, he would expound on Kedar Khand and Shiva Purana.

There is another shorter route from Malla to Sahasrataal via Jodav village and Pandav Sera. There are dense forests, precious trees of Baanj, Chaura plant and other vegetation along this route. The roots of the Chaura plant are very useful medicinally. The plant is now facing extinction with people selling its roots indiscriminately. Another noteworthy feature on this route is a big sloping plain called Kush Kalyan. Till 50 years ago, this place was very beautiful. But now cowherds bring hundreds of buffaloes here for grazing, thus literally denuding the area. The state government has allotted specific areas to these cowherds, but they still take their buffaloes to most of the bugyals of the lower Himalaya and have turned them into pastures. Some cowherds have even settled down on these bugyals. Buffaloes loosen the soil with their hooves, creating swampy conditions during the rainy season. Ultimately it leads to severe erosion



The clouds inviting the valleys and mountains – come, dance with us. View from Kush Kalyan.



Khatling glacier and Sahasrataal in deep freeze.



The tumultuous confluence of Alaknanda and Mandakini at Rudraprayag. The Alaknanda is muddy white and fast, Mandakini is dark green and slow.

FACING PAGE:

ABOVE LEFT: Like a vain woman possessing a prized ornament, the mountain side proudly displays a sparkling white waterfall. On the way to Kedarnath ...

ABOVE RIGHT: A sanyasi absorbed in offering water as oblation to the Sun god at Gauri Kund, on the way to Kedarnath. There is a hot water spring at Gauri Kund on the bank of the river Mandakini.

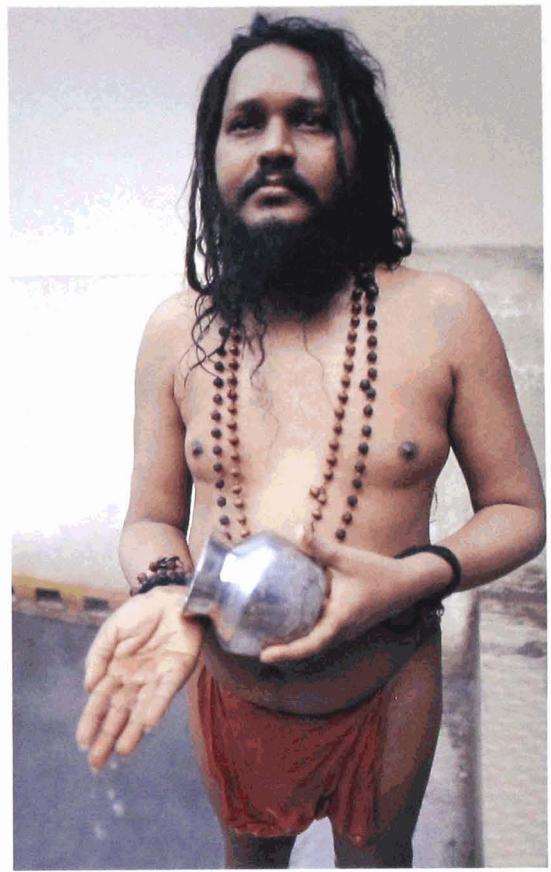
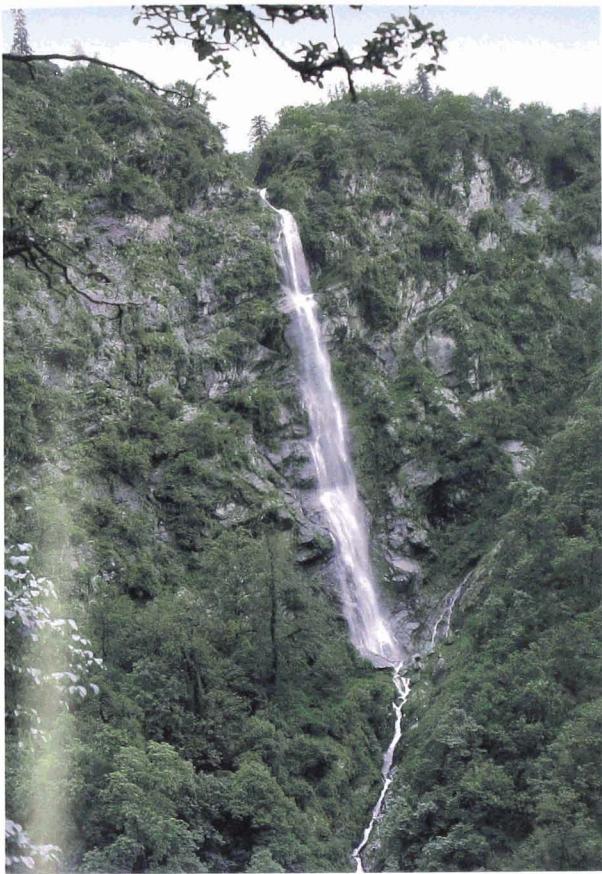
BETWEEN: Pilgrims from Kedarnath walking down the ice stairs. One of them is being carried in a kandi (cane basket).

which triggers landslides. Cattle grazing must be banned forthwith in the bugyals of the Himalaya. The grazing of sheep and horses can be tolerated only to a certain extent.

The Ascent to Kedarnath

The 14-km climb from Gauri Kund to Kedarnath is very tough. Only healthy young men and women should undertake the journey on foot. It is not possible for old and weak people to complete the journey by evening. They have to either stop on the way or reach Kedarnath Dham after dark. There is a track for horses and mules alongside the foot track. Horses, mules, *kandis* and *dandis* are available at Gauri Kund. At every two kilometres, there are halting places. To cater to the large number of pilgrims who now make this pilgrimage, tea shops and *dhabas* have mushroomed all along the way. At every corner one finds beggars in the garb of sadhus. Antisocial elements also take this opportunity to harass pilgrims. The *pandas* and *pujaris* of Kedarnath mislead the pilgrims. They do not guide them to dharamshalas, but put them up in cold, open verandahs of their houses, and charge exorbitant rates just for that bit of shelter. There should be selfless organizations at pilgrimage centres to guide and help the visitors; otherwise the reputation of all these centres is bound to suffer.

Mandakini river, also known as the Mandakini Ganga, flows by the side of the trail from Gauri Kund to Kedarnath. The valley of the river is very narrow throughout. It broadens out only when nearing Kedarnath Dham. The Kedarnath temple, dharamshalas and rest houses are all across the Mandakini and for crossing over, a bridge has been built at Kedarnath township. The horses and mules do





Aerial view of Kedarnath pilgrimage centre on the bank of Mandakini. Photo taken while ascending to Gandhi Sarovar, so named because this is where a portion of Mahatma Gandhi's ashes were immersed (pic 1990).

Frostbitten foot of a well known mountaineer.



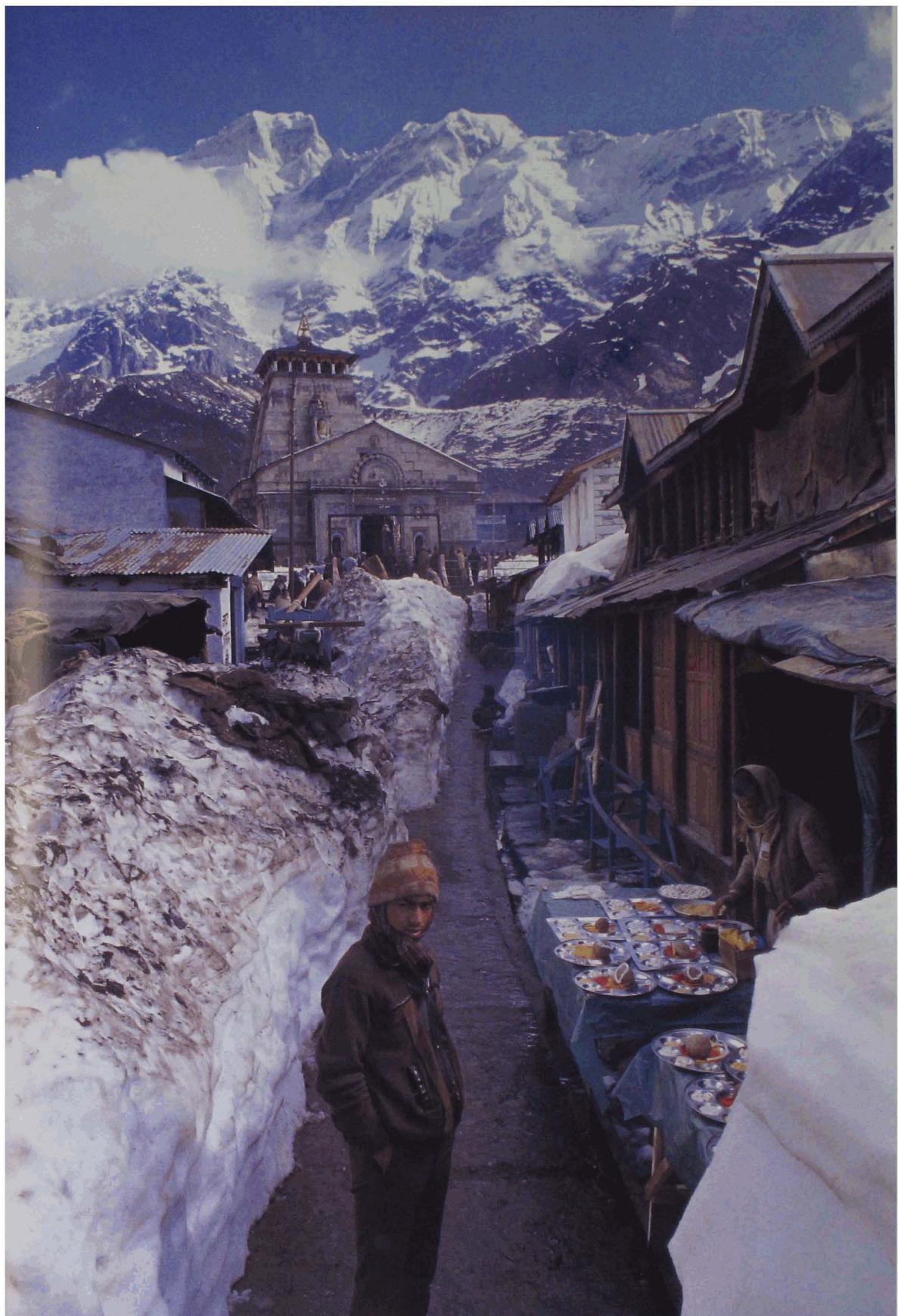
not cross the bridge. The administration has set up tin shades for stabling the horses. Travelling on foot to Kedarnath with its striking natural beauty used to be an uplifting experience. But now with the unchecked opening of dhabas and the menace of beggars it has lost some of its charm.

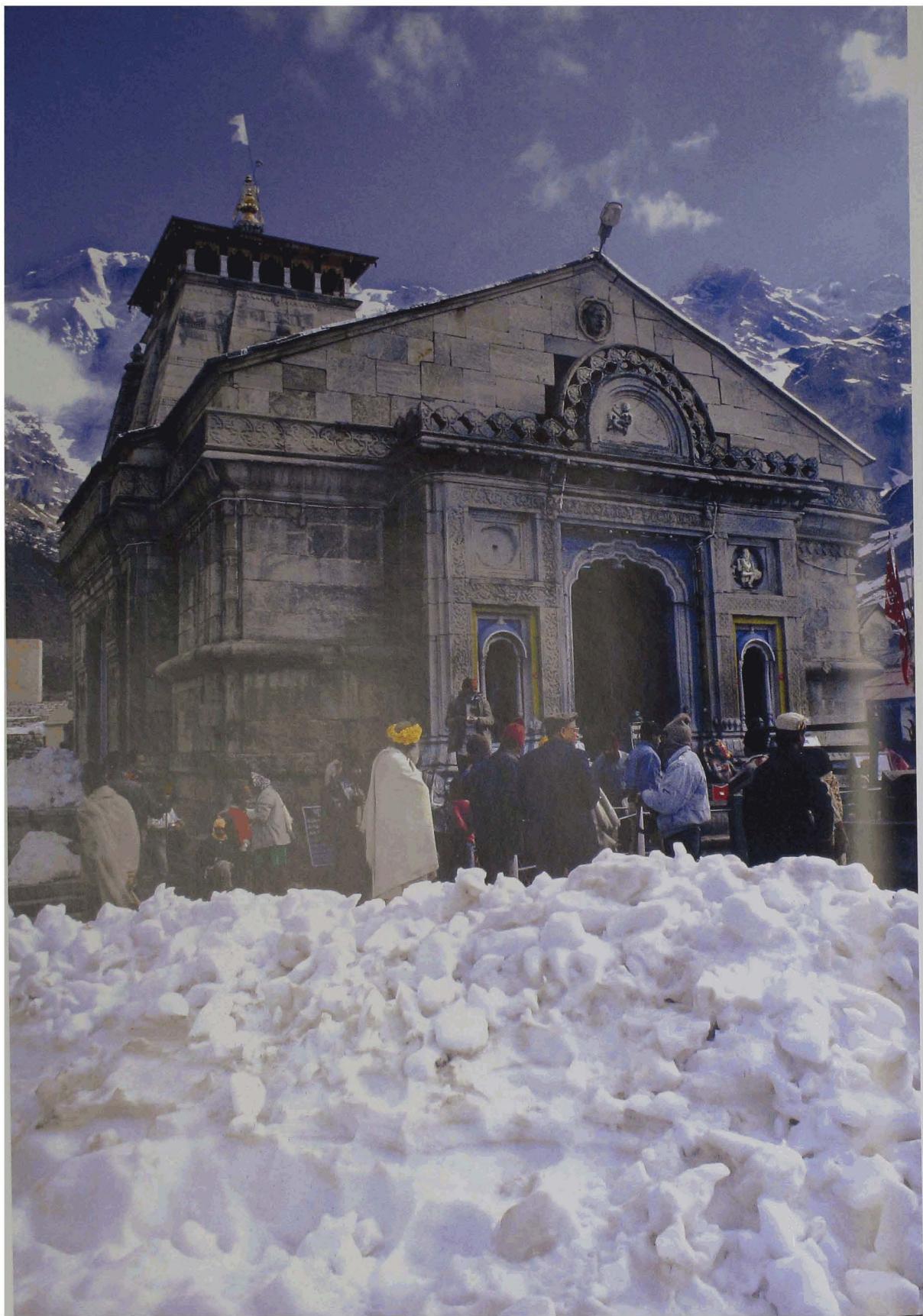
Kedarnath Temple

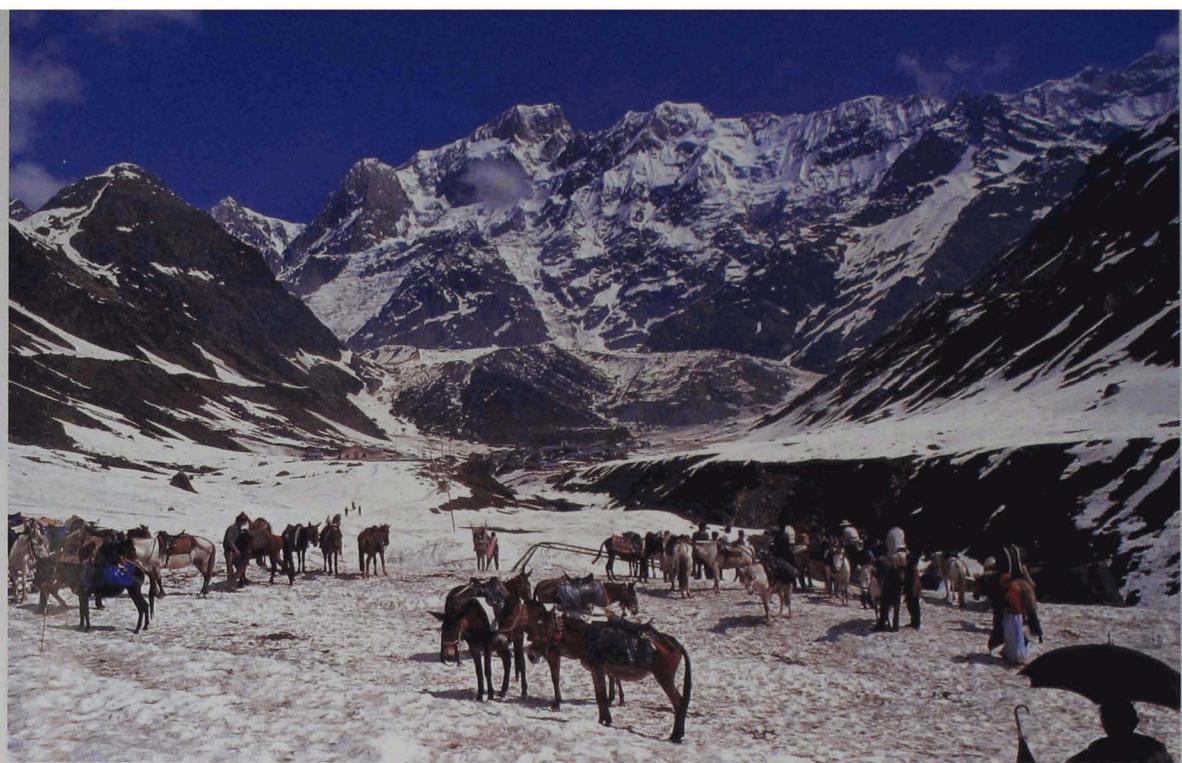
Kedarnath Dham, at 11,770 ft, is a place of incomparable beauty. The Kedarnath temple is situated in a vast plain on the banks of the Mandakini. Snow-capped peaks surround the plain. It is a big temple and is an excellent work of architecture. Actually, this great temple is built over a natural outcrop of a rock. There is no idol in the temple. In the courtyard of the temple, right in front of the entrance door, there is an artistic statue of Nandi, the bull, the mythological 'mount' of Lord Shiva. Nandi is considered the symbol of Dharma (religious duty), Artha (wealth), Kama (action) and Moksha (salvation). In the outer wing of Kedarnath temple are striking statues of the five Pandavas and also their wife, Draupadi. The worship of Lord Shiva is performed in the sanctum-sanctorum. Ever since the time of Shankaracharya, the priests of the temple have to be Lingayat Brahmins from Karnataka, a state in south India. The priests dress-up as Shiva while performing worship.

Kedarnath Dham is a very cold place. Even in summers, within minutes of the sun setting behind the mountains, the temperature dips to below zero degree. In the winter the temple gets buried under thick snow. Around the month of May, the ice is cut and the temple doors are opened after ritualistic worship. In

FACING PAGE: Shops selling articles of worship on the final stretch to Kedarnath temple. Kedar, Keerti, Meru and Sumeru peaks overlook the temple.







the established order of Hindu pilgrimage to the four Himalayan centres, pilgrims first visit Yamunotri, Gangotri and then come to Kedarnath Dham. The last destination is Badrinath Dham.

Around Kedarnath

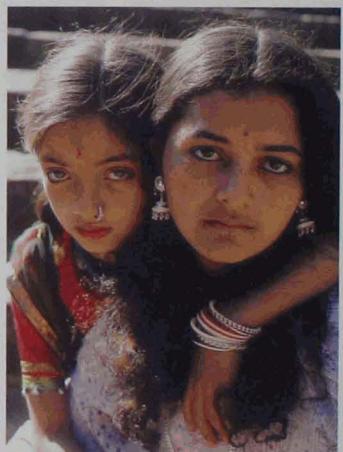
One can travel to famous Vasuki Taal (different from the Vasuki Taal at the base of Kalindi peak) from Kedarnath after crossing the Mandakini river. But only experienced mountaineers or trekkers, with a strong will, can undertake this journey on which there is a steep climb of 14,000 to 16,000 ft. The trail is stony with large rocks on the path. There is a descent for about 2 to 2.5 kilometres before one reaches Vasuki Taal. The lake is shaped like a snake and its circumference is about two kilometres. According to mythology, Vasuki is a snake which encircles the neck of Lord Shiva. During the climb there is a stretch of four kilometres which is covered with colourful flowers. The climbers have to trample these flowers underfoot to move forward. From Vasuki Taal one can reach Khatling glacier and Sahasratal. On this route there is the beautiful forest of Ringal, but there is danger of losing one's way here as this forest is usually covered with clouds which reduce visibility to a great extent.

Chauravari Glacier

About 1.5 to 2 kilometres behind the Kedarnath temple is the famous Chauravari glacier. The access to the glacier is very easy from the temple. Travellers can go and come back before noon. This glacier is the source of the Mandakini river. There is a lake here which is called Gandhi Sarovar because a portion of Mahatma Gandhi's ashes was immersed here. About 4-5 kilometres north of Gandhi Sarovar

Mules station on the banks of Mandakini in Kedarnath Dham: horses and mules waiting to be hired. In the centre is the temple and Kedarpuri. On the left is mount Bhairon which is considered the guardian of Kedar valley.

These sisters were revived with herbal medicine by the author on the way to Kedarnath. Pilgrims often get sick due to unaccustomed exertion and a rarified atmosphere.





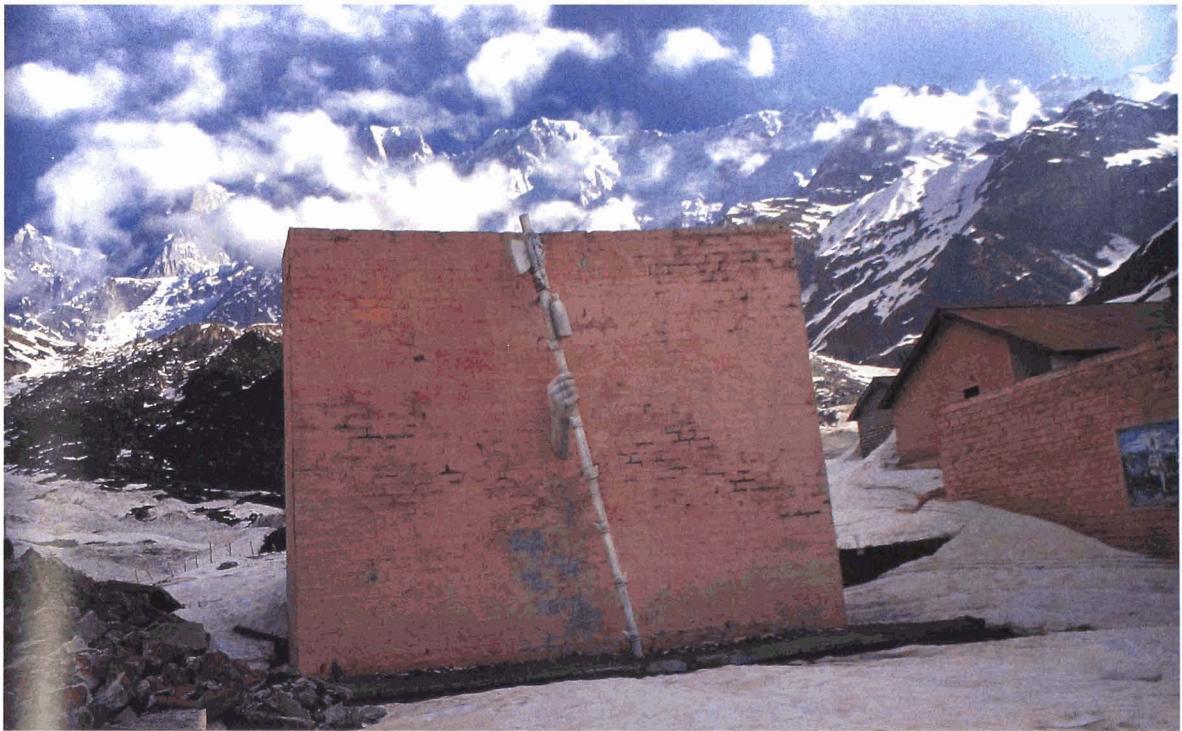
The forbidding Kalindi Ice peak took a toll of two mountaineers.
Their bodies were buried under snowslides and haven't been found.

Memorial to two
mountaineers at Vasuki
lake (ht 18,000 ft).

They were buried in a
snowslide on the way to
Kalindi peak in 1980.

The author placed his
offerings in front of the
memorial and prayed for
the peace of the departed
souls. The Vasuki lake has
now dried up and cracks
have appeared on its bed.





The memorial to Adi Shankaracharya behind the Kedarnath temple. According to belief, the Shankaracharya vanished from here without leaving a trace.



One shooter encounters another: while the author shoots with his camera, the man in the pic prefers to shoot with the real gun. Bhakta Kund at the base of Shivalinga peak. The ranges in the background have to be crossed to reach Kedarnath.

FACING PAGE:

A lake at 18,000 ft. In 1979 this lake was over one km long, but has now shrunk considerably. In the background is Shivalinga mountain from an uncommon angle showing both its peaks.

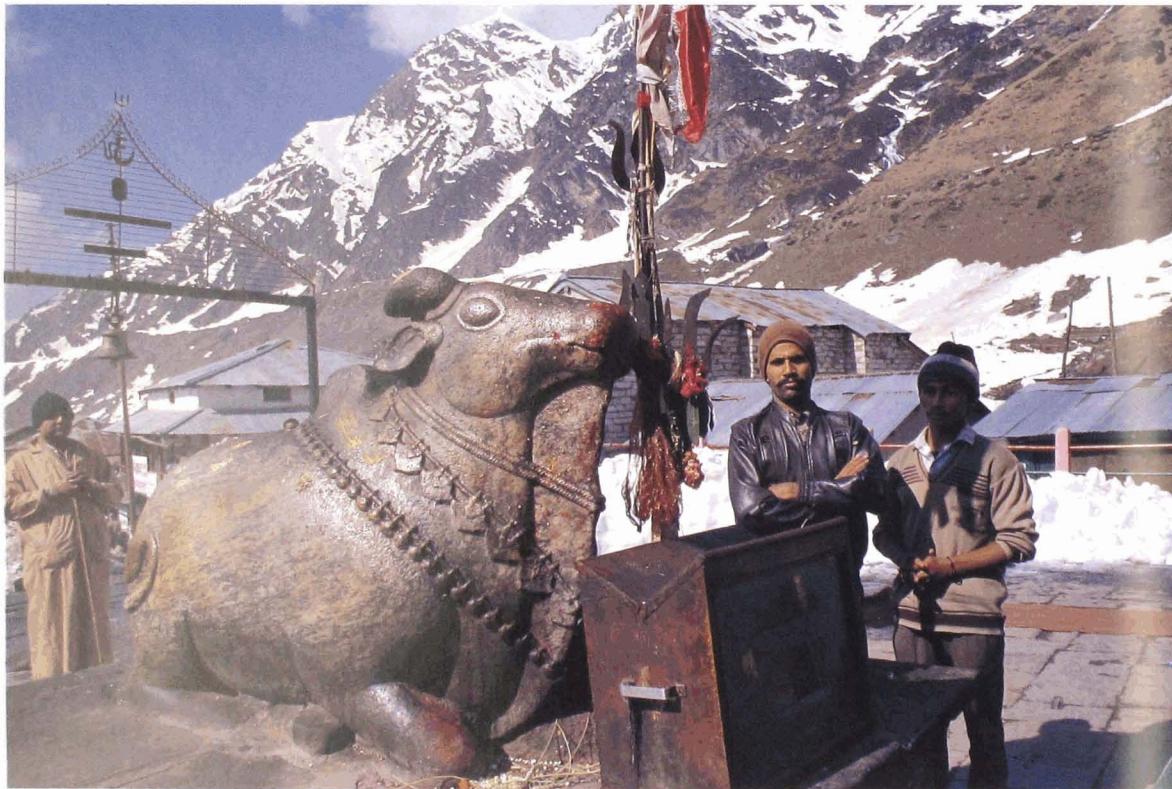
is Brahma Gufa. Snow-covered peaks are visible in the north. It is said that 1,250 years ago, Adi Shankaracharya gave up his body in the Gufa after having triumphantly spread Vedic religion throughout the land of Bharat (Indian subcontinent). There is a memorial to Shankaracharya behind the temple. On the way back from Brahma Gufa, there is the place of Kaal Bhairav, the guardian of Kedar valley where he is worshipped. Below Kaal Bhairav, in the Ishan, there is a temple and also a stream.

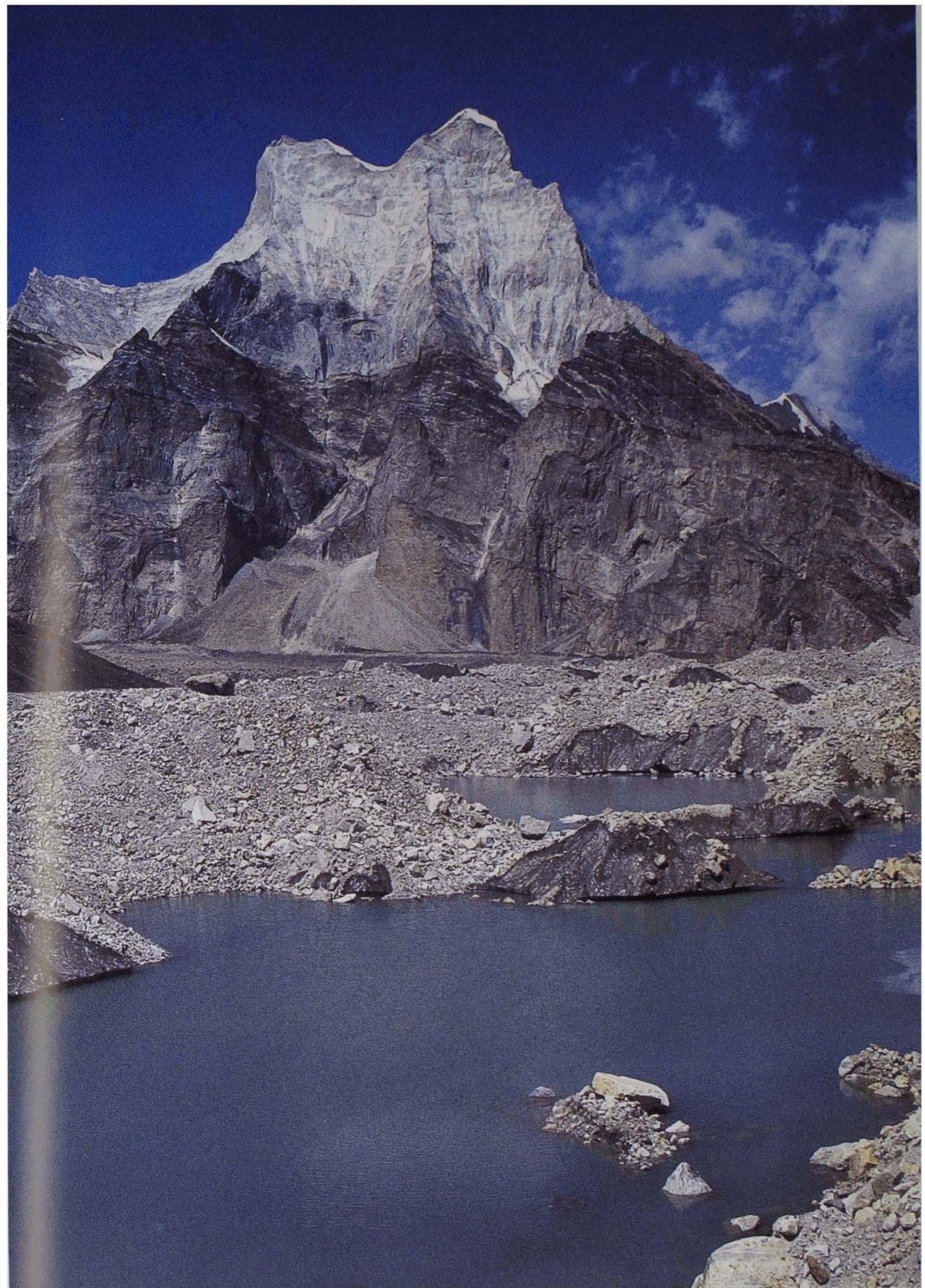
It is possible to reach Gangotri glacier from Chauravari glacier but only at great risk to one's life. The route through peaks and valleys is very dangerous. A Japanese mountaineering team made an attempt on the Bharat-kunna and Kirti stambha peaks. On their way back one of the team members lost his way and was left behind. He lost his sense of direction but somehow survived and reached Chauravari. The rest of the team members gave him up for dead and returned to Gangotri. When that exhausted Japanese mountaineer turned up at Kedarnath temple, everyone was taken by surprise. In a sense, he should be considered the first person to have done the Gangotri-Kedarnath trip.

Kali Math

Nowadays, pilgrims travelling by bus complete their trip of the four pilgrimage centres in a hurry. They are thus deprived of the sight of several other beautiful pilgrimage sites. They are unable to fully understand the religious and historical significance of the old pilgrimage centres of the Himalaya, such as the holy place of Kali Math. The foot path to it lies along the left bank of the Mandakini river

Nandi, Lord Shiva's mythical bull, carved out of a rock at the entrance to Kedarnath temple.







Saalam Mishri flower: its seeds and roots have medicinal value.

Red flowers set the forest in Bhrigu valley ablaze in September and October.

Kali Math is situated in very pleasant surroundings. Sadhus and ascetics rest here. The very old idols at Kali Math include a damaged statue of Shiva in his Taandav dance pose. After Kali Math, the path leads to the famous bugyal of Madhya Maheshwar. The environment here is still unspoiled, partly because few people visit this place due to a very difficult ascent. There is a Shiva temple here whose priest is a Lingayat Brahmin from Karnataka and has an assistant. It is such a beautiful place that one doesn't feel like leaving it. A thick forest lies below the temple. There are plenty of flowers and medicinal plants. Birds too are seen in large numbers.

After Madhya Maheshwar, there is an easy descent for over 10 kms. The journey is enjoyable with peaks all around. After the descent one reaches a famous place called Ukhi Math. When the Kedarnath temple is closed in winters, its priests descend to this place and continue the worship of Shiva. At a little distance from Ukhi Math is the famous temple of Tunganath which is said to have been established by Adi Shankaracharya. It is considered the highest temple in the Himalaya. From Tunganath it is easy to visit another nearby place called Chandra Shila. It takes a climb of two kilometres to reach this place which is at a height of 14,000 ft. A magnificent view of the vastness of the Himalaya can be had here.





Bridges and pathways across Kedarganga paved with snow at Gangotri.

Most of the peaks of Gangotri area are also visible. This breathtaking sight is enough to rejuvenate one after the rigours of the steep climb.

The road from Chopta at the foot of Tunganath takes one to Gopeshwar. There is an ancient temple in Gopeshwar in front of which is a giant *trishool* (trident) cast in *ashtadhatu*, an alloy of eight metals. It is a symbol of Shiva's shakti. Devotees worship the trident also. An even bigger trident stands in the courtyard of the ancient Vishwanath temple in Uttarkashi. It has inscriptions in Brahmi and Pali languages which say that this trident will last as long as the sun lasts.

Between Gopeshwar and Chandra Shila there is a government institute dedicated to research on medicinal plants and herbs. Till some years ago, musk deer and some other animals were also kept in the garden of the institute, which nurtures many rare flowers of the Himalaya as well. Such commendable efforts and activities should be replicated and expanded. The institute also grows a plant, called *van-kakri* the root of which is useful in treating blood cancer. This plant has almost disappeared from the forests. It is a unique plant which flowers and gives fruit in May. A single leaf of this plant is as broad as an elephant's foot. The *van-kakri* can also be seen in the Tapovan cottage at Gangotri. Near Gopeshwar, Chamoli — another hill town — has now expanded considerably. It is situated in a large open valley on the left bank of the Alaknanda river. On the same side of the river near Gopeshwar, is a very cool and beautiful place called Koteswar Mahadev.

Van Kakri. In keeping with their blood-red colour, the fruits of this plant are said to cure blood cancer and other circulatory disorders.





Bell a wish. It is a popular belief in the western Himalaya that offering a bell to a temple brings fulfillment of your wish.
Kartikeya temple in Kedar valley.



A pilgrim returning from Kedarnath Dham in a palanquin carried by 4 bearers.

Kartikeya Swami Temple

At a height of about 7,000 ft above Koteshwar Mahadev is the temple of Kartikeya Swami. According to Hindu scriptures, Kartikeya Swami, also known as Subrahmanyam Swami, was the commander of the army of the gods. He is greatly revered in south India where there are several artistic temples dedicated to him. From here one gets a fascinating view of Himalayan peaks.

Nearby is a place called Helang. There is a rope bridge over the river Alaknanda after crossing which one reaches the pedestrian track of Kalpa Kedar. Kalpa Kedar mountains have a unique shape. In between lies an agricultural area, forests and a grand mountain range. It is frequented more by foreign tourists than Indians. One reason for this could be that an intoxicant called *sulfa-ganja* can easily be obtained here. Some antisocial elements even prepare *charas* from hemp plants growing here and indulge in its smuggling.

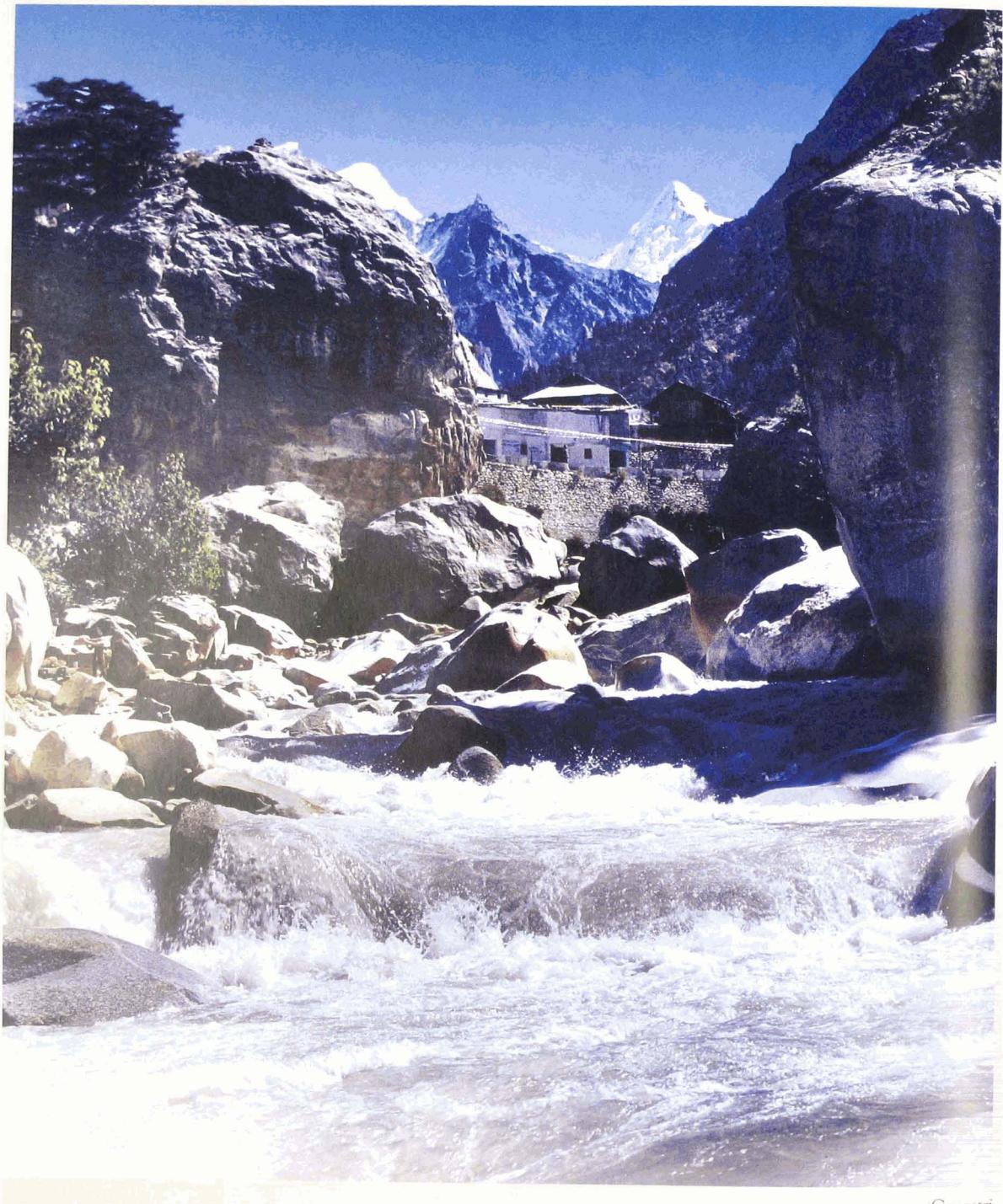
A pedestrian track climbs steeply to Rudranath from Kalpa Kedar. Rudranath is another name of Lord Shiva but there is no Shivlinga here. Instead there is an idol of Shiva in a terrifying posture. Situated at a height of 14,000 ft, it is a magnificent place. Another route to Rudranath is via Anusuya, Gopeshwar and Mandal, but that is a difficult route. ☺

Gods come in all forms, shapes and sizes as at this temple situated in Chamoli district.



Himalaya

An ageless body, a timeless mind



Gangotri

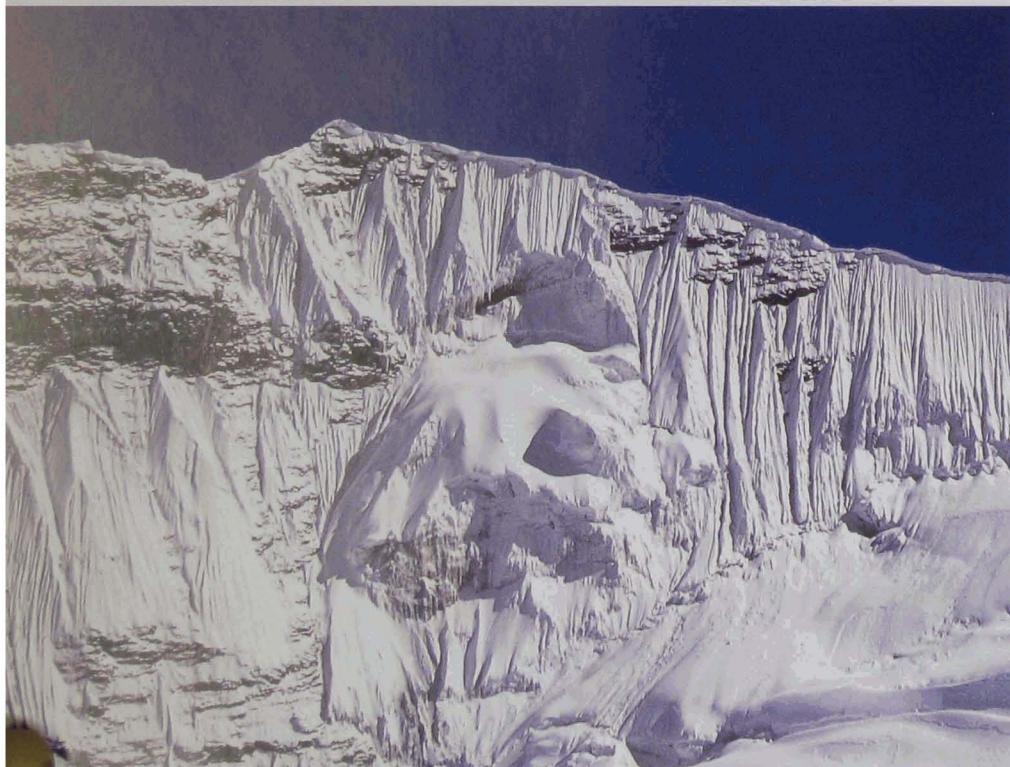


▲ Works of modern art by Ganga on the ancient Bhagirathi rocks. ▼





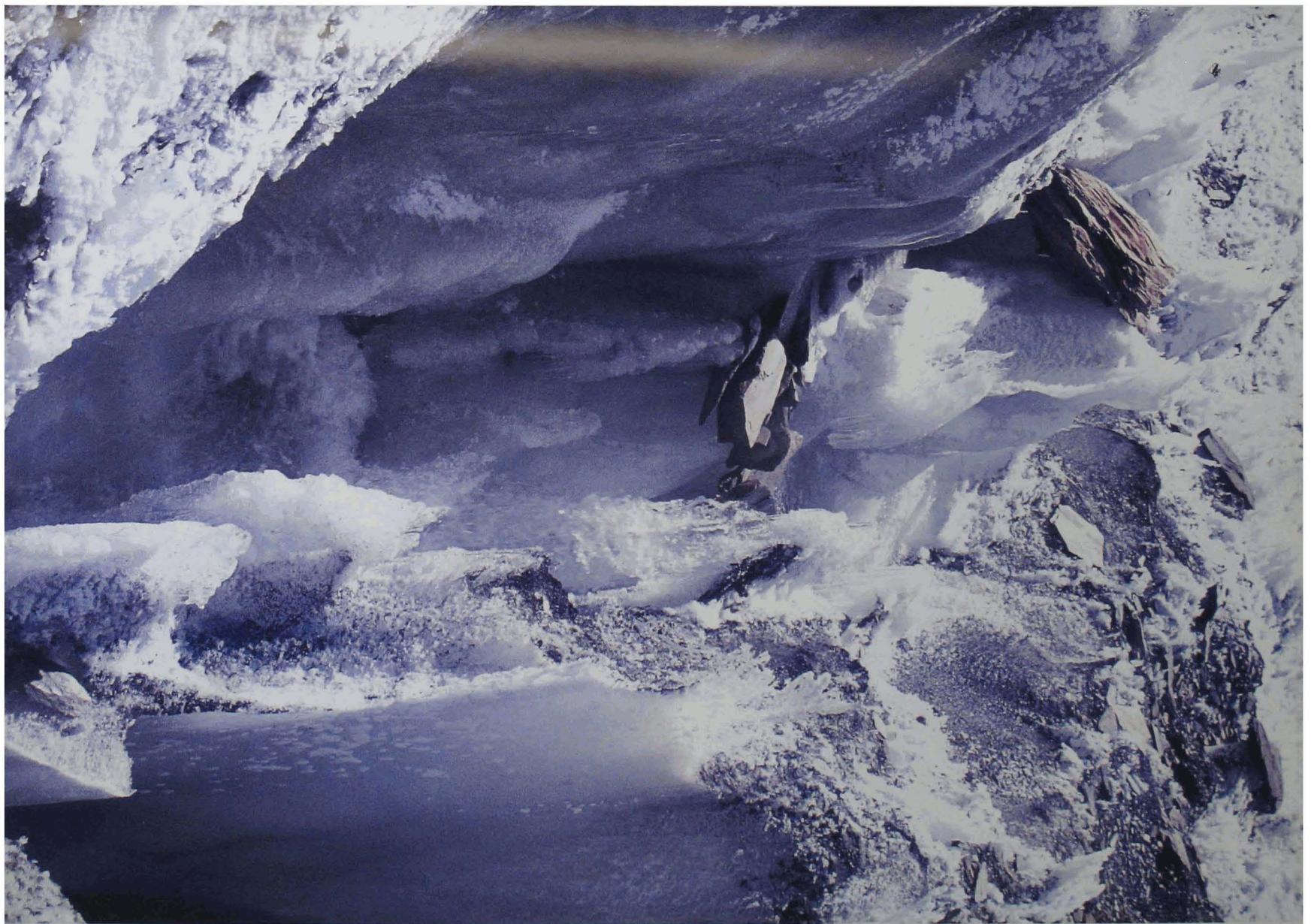
Labour of love: hard rocks chiselled by soft water.



A snow lion guards an armory of ice rifles. Mountain between Satopanth and Suralaya peaks. Even the avalanches here are accompanied by the sound of cannonfire.

FACING PAGE:
Calling all dare-devil divers:
a rocky ramp invites them to
take a plunge in the snowy
swimming pool.

NEXT SPREAD:
Rocks on the glacier provide
the illusion of a road in the
beginning of the climb to
Kalindi Pass. In the
foreground is a perilous field
of seracs — the reason why it
takes a full day to cross this
valley, hardly 6-7 kms wide.







The deep, unfathomable 'cavern of death' on the way to Kalindi pass.



A veil of ice guards the entrance to a mysterious cave.

Mount Mana on the Gomukh-Badrinath route. Rocks and boulders keep falling from it day and night. Even snow is unable to stick to the slopes. The near flat top dons the white cap the year round.







◀ Death traps: One moment there is a gaping crevasse, the next moment it is smooth ice. After a spell of heavy snow, a multitude of crevasses get covered with soft deceptive snow. Inside, ice-hard walls are instruments of death.

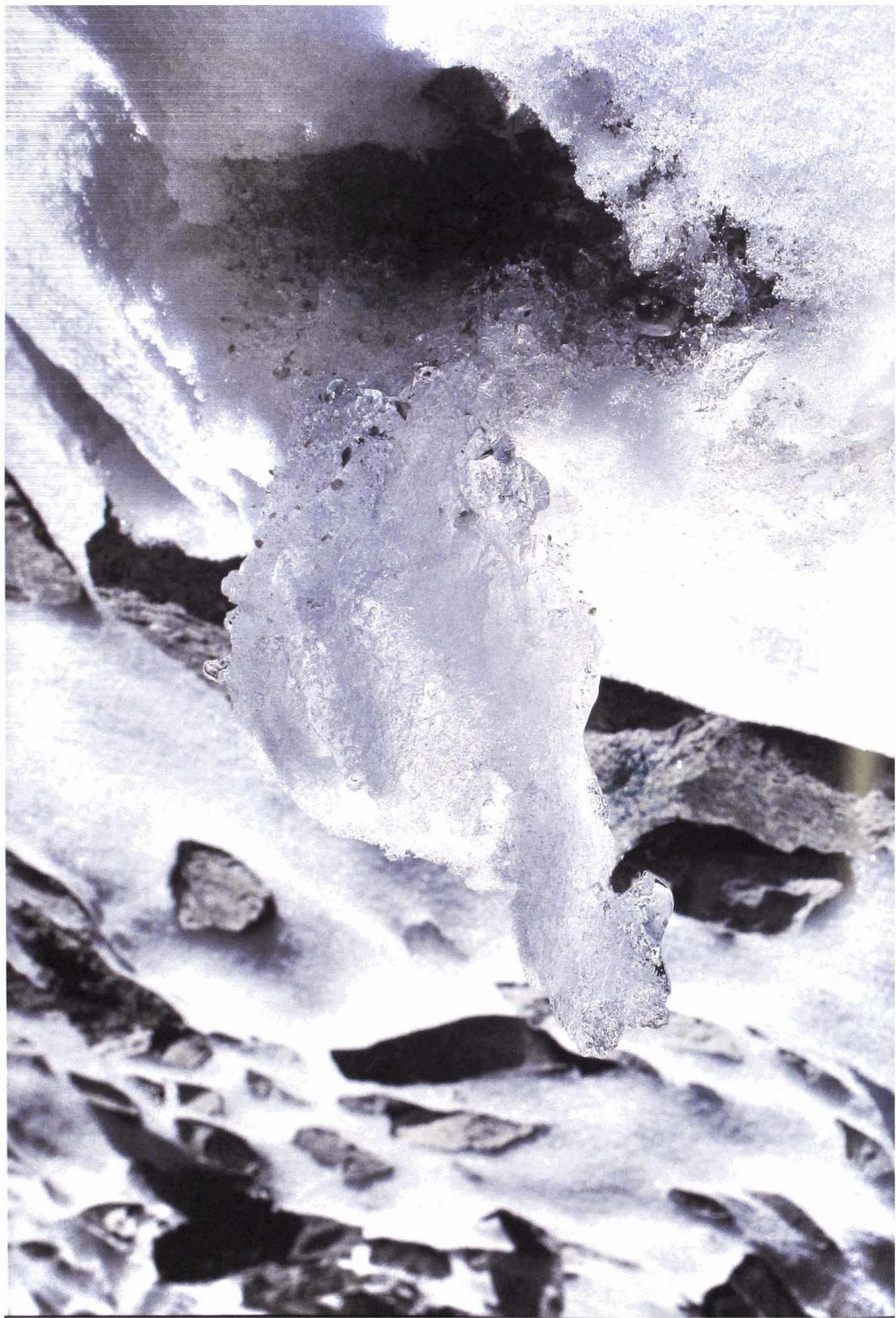


An ice dance or Lord Krishna's Raas Leela ?



A boat sculpted in ice. Will it ferry the soul to heaven ?

FACING PAGE: A mountain ice-goat: how long will it survive under the piercing rays of the sun?





The Gods descend on the Himalaya: Lord Vishnu rests on Sheshnag,
the mythological serpent. Lakshmi, his consort, sits at His side.

शान्ताकारं भुजगशयनं पद्मनाभं सुरेशं विश्वाधारं गगनसदृशं मेघवर्णं शुभाङ्गम् ।
लक्ष्मीकान्तं कमलनयनं योगिभिर्द्यन्नगम्यं वन्देविष्णुं भवभयहरं सर्वलोकैकं नाथम् ॥ (विष्णु वन्दना से)

"I bow before Vishnu, consort of goddess Lakshmi, the Lord and sustainer of this Universe, who reclines peacefully on a serpent, is king of all gods, has eyes like lotus, has perfect limbs and complexion like clouds, removes all worldly fears, and can be understood by yogis only through deep meditation" (excerpt from Vishnu Vandana).

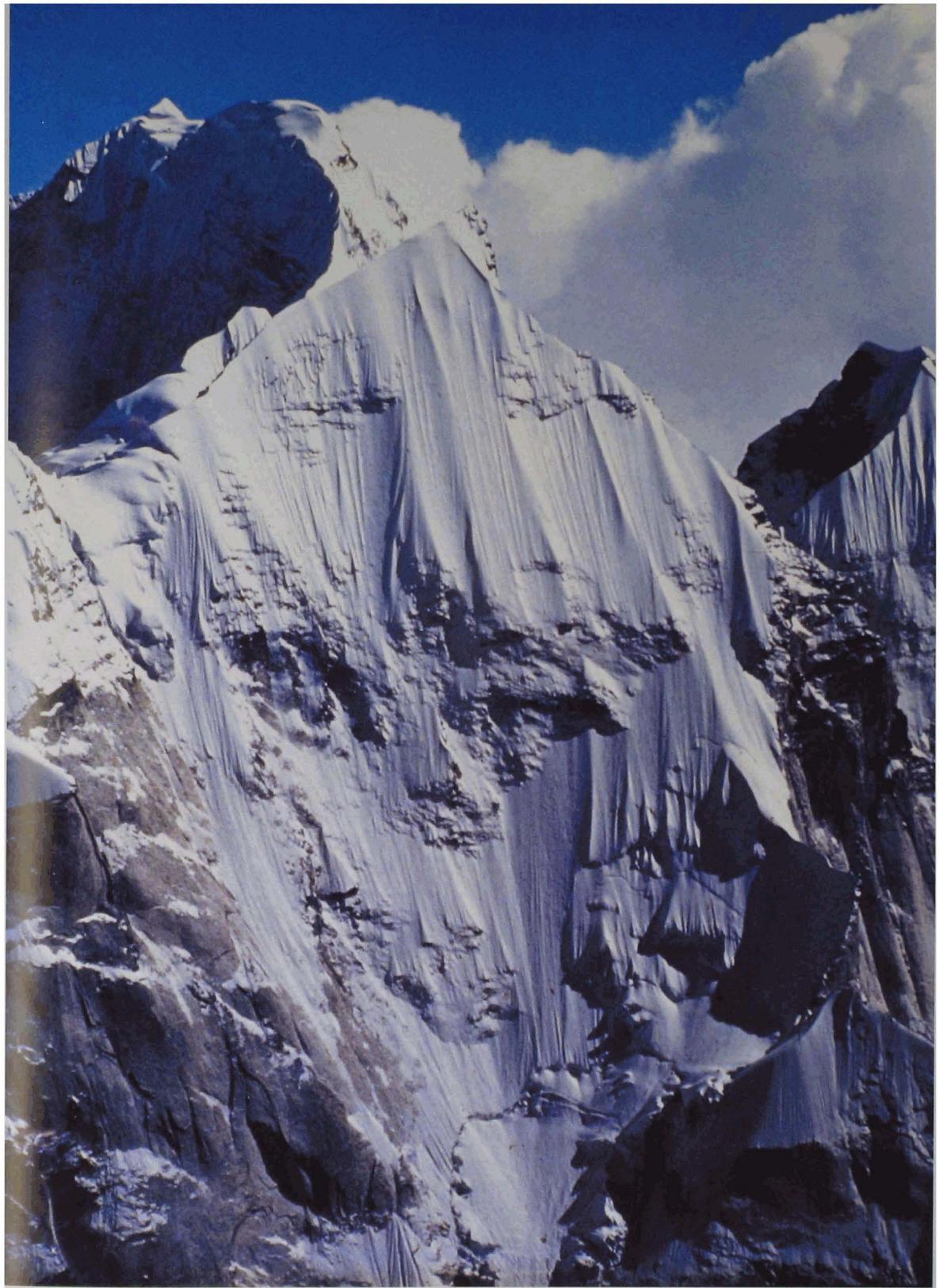


A bird of peace rises from an icefield.



Himalayan Snow Airlines: supersonic ice plane?

FACING PAGE: Jester, Justice or simply an Actor ...
whose face is this on Bhagirath peak?



Pilgrims Final Destination – Badrinath Dham

Climbing down from Kalpa Kedar and crossing over to the right bank of the river Alaknanda, one reaches the road to Badrinath Dham. Northwards on this path, there is a place called Peepal Koti, and next to it is Joshimath. There are good arrangements for staying in Peepal Koti, but few people halt there. Instead, buses carrying pilgrims usually stop for the night at Joshimath where there are plenty of dharamshalas and hotels. There is an ancient temple of Narsingh Bhagwan at Joshimath. The woodwork of this temple is extraordinary, but more than that, the significance of this temple lies in the fact that the idol of Badri Narayana is brought and kept here after the Badrinath Dham temple is closed for winters. The ritual worship of the Badri Narayana idol continues at the temple of Narsingh Bhagwan. This ancient Math (temple-monastery) is unfortunately embroiled in several court cases over its custody. It is believed that 1250 years ago, Adi Shankaracharya meditated here in a cave and experienced divine communion. There is a Shiva temple near the cave. An old mulberry tree in the temple is worshipped and people go round it and seek wish-fulfillment.

There is also an Indian army cantonment in Joshimath. In 1963, the author led and guided an army expedition through Gangotri, Gomukh, Kalindi Pass, Mana and Badrinath route. On the team's return to Joshimath, the author was welcomed and honoured by the army in the cantonment. At a distance of 4-5 kilometres from Joshimath are several hot water springs where local people go for picnic and bathing.

Above Joshimath en route to Badrinath Dham is a giant valley and a sloping plain called Auli. In winters it snows heavily and Auli remains snowbound. A tourist centre has been developed here. A ropeway has been installed and there are also arrangements for skiing. Skiing is not very popular in India yet, although there are a large number of snow-covered places in the Himalaya which can be developed for this purpose. Auli presents a fascinating view of Kuber-Bhandar and Hathi mountain peaks.



Glaciers at mount Mana. Trekking from here to Badrinath Dham takes 4-5 days.



Mount Chandra (ht 22,000 ft) viewed from Sita glacier (ht 19,000 ft).

A meal they will remember forever: pilgrims at Pipalkoti on the way to Badrinath.

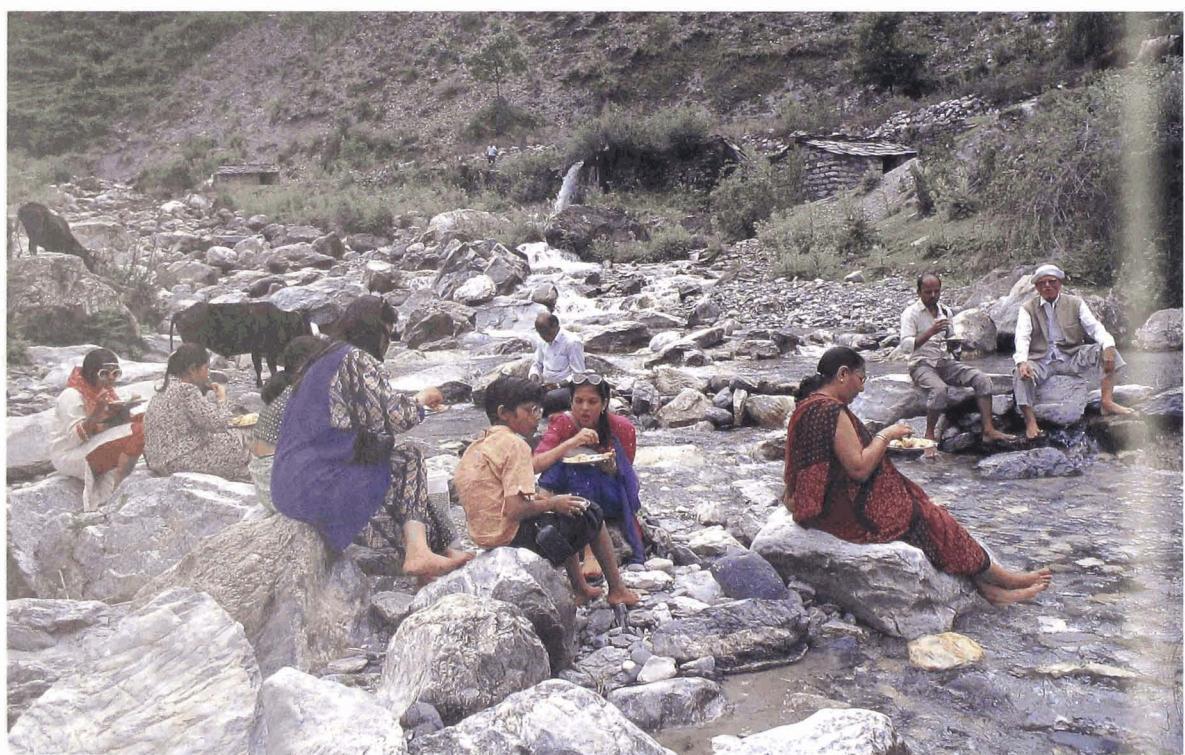
Niti-Hoti Pass

A road from Joshimath winds its way up to the Niti-Hoti Pass on the Indo-Tibetan border. Through this pass there are two routes to reach Kailash-Mansarovar, but both are unfortunately closed. Before the India-China war of 1962, there used to be trade with Tibet through this pass.

Fossils of marine creatures are found on both sides of the mountain at Niti-Hoti Pass. This is proof that in some bygone age, there was sea in-between the Indian island and the Tibetan plateau. As mentioned earlier, the collision of these two landmasses gave birth to the Himalaya and the sea dried up. Indian geologists are engaged in research on this subject.

Panch Badri

In the Himalaya, there are five Kedars and five Prayags. Similarly there are five Badris also — Badrinath Dham, Adi Badri, Dhyan Badri, Vriddha Badri and Bhavishya Badri. In ancient literature, Badrinath Dham is mentioned as Badri, Badrivan and Badrikashram. Adi Badri is a magnificent sight. The sculpture of the temple idols is of a very high quality and the beautiful idol of Narayana is made from an alloy called *ashtadhatu*. There are stone statues also of Narayana. In Vriddha Badri, the idol has been installed in a temple which is part of a house. On the Joshimath-Badrinath road there is a beautiful place called Bhavishya Badri. It is possible that ancient rishis thought that if ever the road to Badrinath got blocked or the shrine got devastated in an avalanche then a new Badrinath Dham would be constructed at Bhavishya Badri. This place is situated below a bugyal.





Nandadevi East, the third highest peak in the entire Himalaya, as seen from the Nanda Khat peak.

Nandadevi twins

From Joshimath the main road goes through a very narrow and frighteningly rugged valley up to Badrinath. Another road goes to the Nandadevi peak and Nandadevi sanctuary.

Actually, Nandadevi is not one but they are two peaks. One peak is known as Nandadevi East and the other as Nandadevi West. Between the two peaks is a ridge which is extremely hazardous to traverse. This ridge was climbed by Rattan Singh – a bold mountaineer who discovered the route to many other peaks too.

Just below the Nandadevi peak there is a large sloping plain where there is an abundance of trees, streams, flora, fauna and birds of many varieties. Amongst animals can be found deer, tiger and brown bear. This is now a protected forest and is closed even to tourists and mountaineers. But unfortunately, poaching is prevalent even in this protected forest. Hunters usually look for musk deer, because each musk pod fetches them close to rupees one lakh. Musk is smuggled from India to Europe and east Asian countries where it is said to be in great demand. Forests too are not spared by smugglers. The big and old trees are illegally felled every year.

This Nandadevi peak and sanctuary route falls in Garhwal. There is another route via Kumaon on which lies the Pindari glacier.

Govind Ghat – Valley of Flowers

Between Joshimath and Badrinath there is a place called Govind Ghat. There is a gurudwara here where people can rest on their way to Hemkund lake and Valley of Flowers. Govind Ghat lies on the bank of the Alaknanda and is a small

With a dew-drop as its prized offering, an orchid bows before the Sun god.



Brahmakamal can be found only at altitudes between 14,000–18,000 ft.

place. The Alaknanda here has to be crossed by a footbridge on the way to the Hemkund lake and Valley of Flowers. The ascent for both places begins at Govind Ghat. The narrow, boulder-strewn path lies along the river Lakshman Ganga. Hemkund lake is on Lakshman Ganga's right and the famous Valley of Flowers on its left. The 5-km climb to Hemkund is very difficult but now steps have been made, though climbing on the steps is equally tiring. On the bank of Hemkund lake is an ancient temple dedicated to Lakshman. A gurudwara has been constructed here and the Sikhs consider it a sacred pilgrimage centre. The lake's circumference is 2.5 km. This lake freezes totally in winter. In summer too Hemkund is a very cold place.

The Valley of Flowers is about 6 km in length and 1.5 kms in width. The flowers in the valley have a very short blooming period – August-September. More than a thousand varieties of exotic flowers can be found here. There is no shelter available and tourists have to bring their own tents and also have to seek camping permission. The valley is at 10,000 to 14,000 ft above sea level. There are many streams in the valley. There is the grave of a British lady who came to collect flowers for the Kew Gardens, fell from a rock while collecting them, broke her leg and died before help could reach her. A botanist, she collected seeds of over 500 types of flowers and herbs. The variety of flowers is now slowly decreasing. There are many animals in this valley, the prominent ones being deer and bears. One needs patience to savour the full joy of being in the valley. On one side of the Valley of Flowers is Kak Bhushundi valley, named after a rishi who related the tale of the Ramayana to a mythological crow. This valley is very attractive, and there has been no assault on its natural environment yet. Relatively few tourists manage to reach here.

On the motorable road ahead of Govind Ghat lies Pandukeshwar which is linked with the Pandavas. Temples of Mahadev (Shiva) and Vasudev (Krishna) are located here. Pandukeshwar's importance lies in the fact that after the closure of the Badrinath



*Who does the mixing and matching of colours for orchids?
Could it be Lord Ganesh?*

NEXT SPREAD: More than rare decorative beauty – Atees has valuable medicinal properties. Its roots are useful in malaria, pneumonia and several other diseases.

temple every winter, the idols of Uddhav and Kuber are brought here. In summers, the idols are taken back to the Badrinath temple in a procession. Hanuman Chatti (different from the one at the base of Yamunotri) and Dev-dekhani are the places ahead. From Dev-dekhani one begins to glimpse the Badri Vishal temple. In the days of pilgrimage by foot, the faithful used to start raising slogans in praise of Badri Vishal right from here. Even those returning after the pilgrimage would join in the singing of Badri Vishal's praises.

In present times, Indians are losing their faith. There are very few sadhus left to explain to them the significance of the Himalayan pilgrimage centres and temples. While it is not proper to blame anybody for this, there is no doubt that under the western influence, Indians are losing touch with their culture and religion. They don't even have a superficial knowledge of Indian heritage. Generally, the affluent people arrive in the Himalaya as if they have come for a picnic.



This member of the cactus family is obviously a Ganesha devotee.

At times the same plant even chants Aum.

Aum Ganeshaya namah!





FACING PAGE:

Badrinath temple and New Alkapuri with their colourful rooftops seen from an unusual angle. Devotees queue up reverentially. For the majority, the darshan of Akhanda Jyoti and Swayambhu Shaligram is fulfilment of a life-time wish.

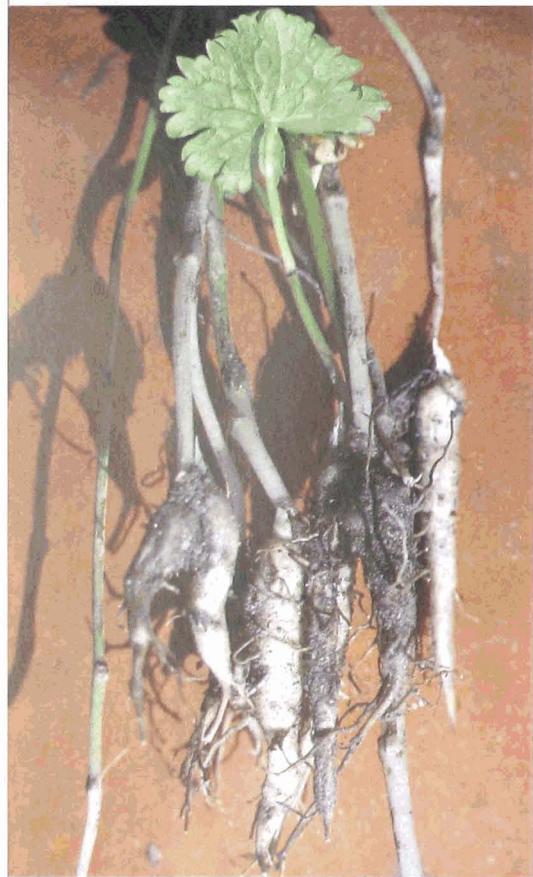


BELOW RIGHT:

Neelkanth peak stands protectively behind Badrinath Dham, ht 10,500 ft (pic 1990).

BELOW LEFT:

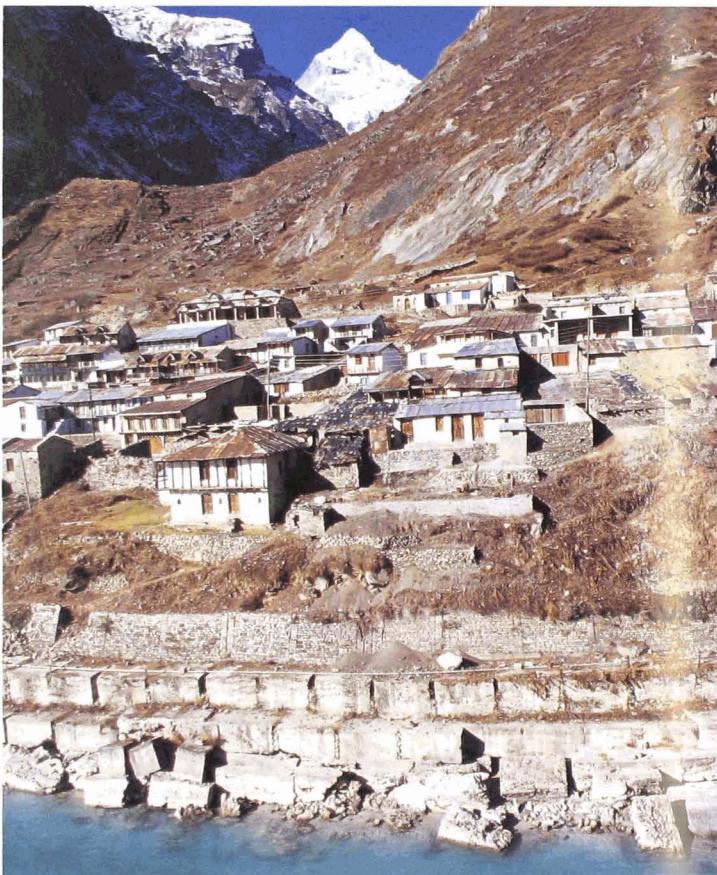
Root of a medicinal plant, Atish. Excessive uprooting for commercial gain has led to its near extinction.

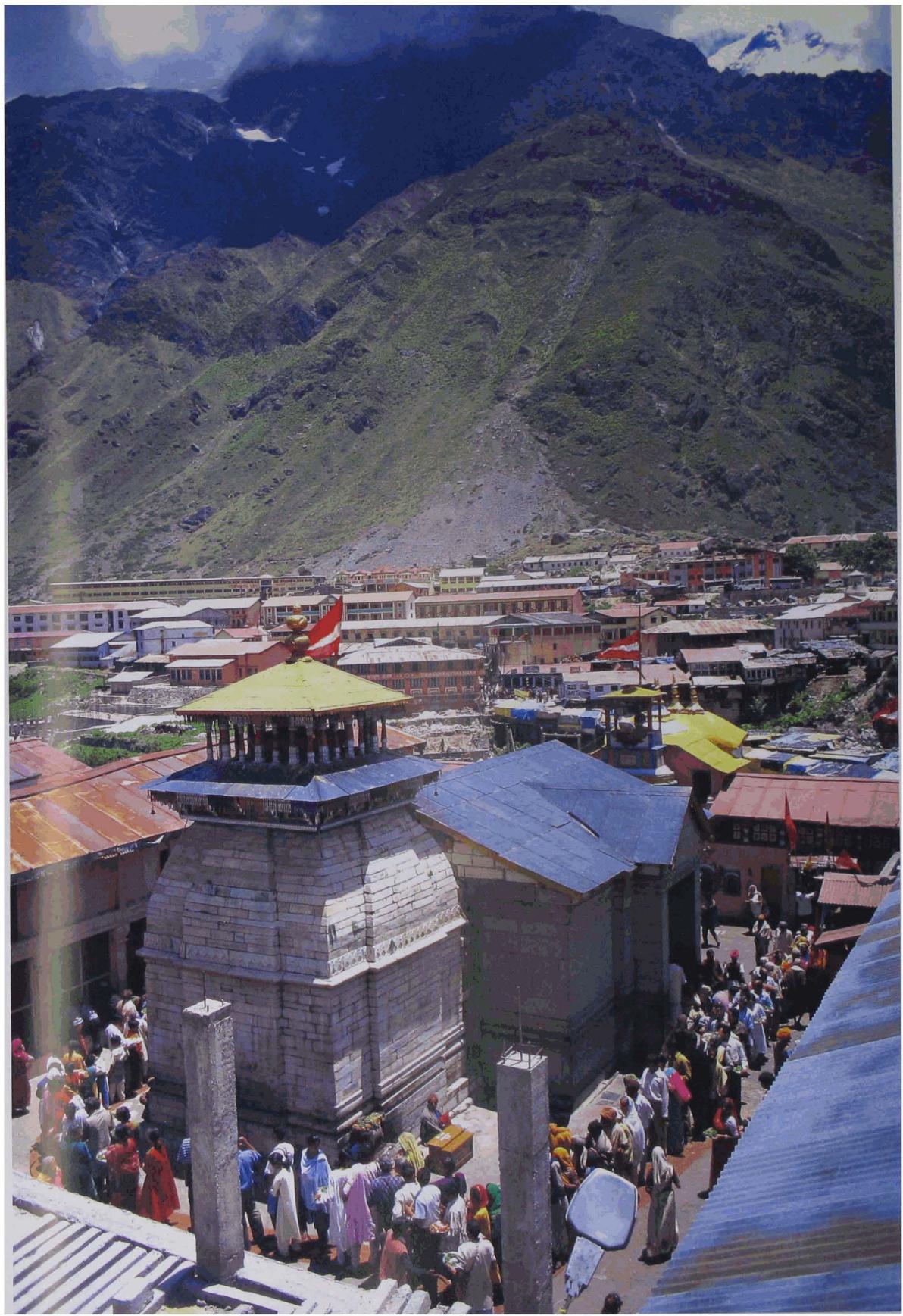


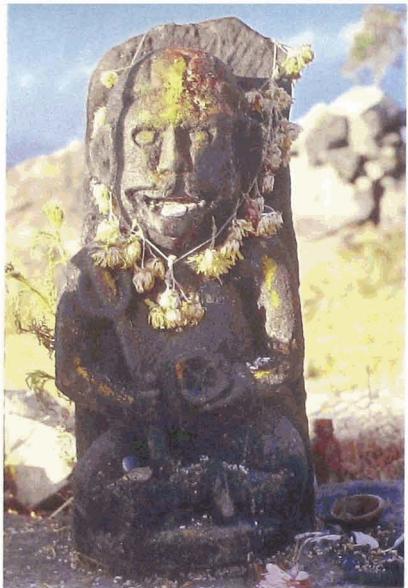
Badrinath Dham

Badrinath is situated at a great height in a large valley. Since the plain is swampy, there are no forests or trees. Grass grows when the swamp dries up. Till 40 years ago, the valley of Badrinath Dham was a large, open, almost level tract of land rich with forests, vegetation and flowers. On the slopes of the valley, there were trees, some of them 700 to 800 years old. These included the holy Bhoj trees whose bark was also used as paper in ancient times for writing manuscripts. The Bhoj tree had several uses. Apart from giving fuel, its dry leaves are used in winter for making a warm bed. These leaves block cold. Today, instead of the forest, there is a clear field. The traffic of buses and cars keeps raising din and dust. There used to be two lakes here. One of these lakes has been filled up with earth and the other has shrunk because its water flow has been blocked due to the buildings that have come up around it. Earlier it was considered irreverent to settle on the southern bank of the river Alaknanda. The temple, the dharamshalas and ashrams were all on the northeastern bank where the pilgrims too were accommodated. Free kitchens for sadhus and ascetics were also on that side.

But now on the southern side too big multi-storey buildings and commercial dharamshalas have come up which charge upto rupees one thousand per day for a room. New hotels are being set up which provide modern facilities to the rich pilgrims. The population of Badrinath Dham has increased so much that it has







Stone idol of Bhairon, the guardian deity of this area, on the way to the temple of Kartikeya Swami.

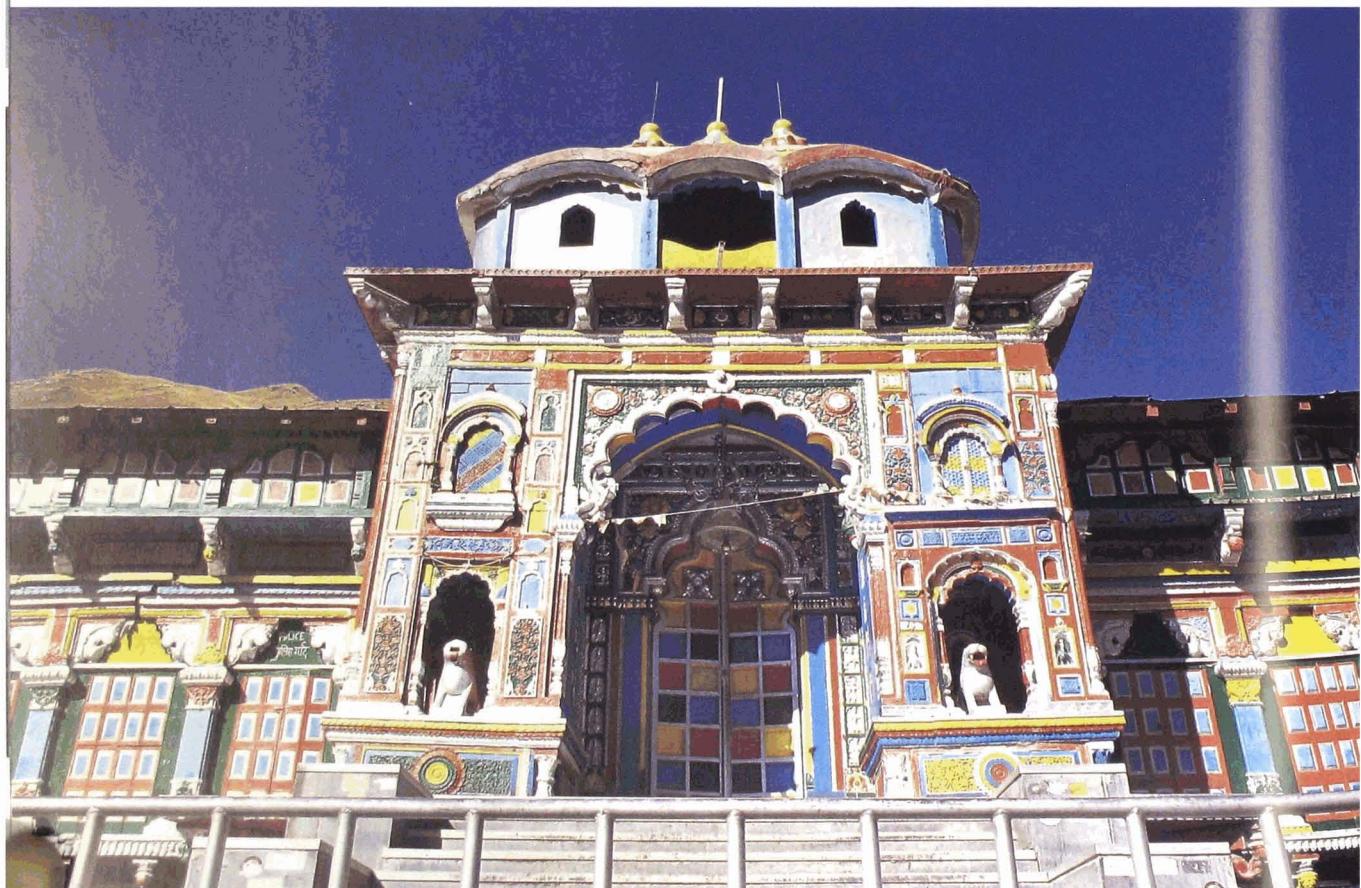
Ornate, colourful and imposing Badrinath temple has a profound impact on pilgrims.

© 2006, S. K. Dutt

become the biggest town of Chamoli district. There are some dharamshalas as in Kedarnath Dham where a nominal amount is charged from pilgrims. Beds and quilts are also available.

In spite of the considerable damage to its natural surroundings, Badrinath Dham continues to be attractive. The atmosphere is full of piety. There is a footbridge over the river Alaknanda for going to the Badrinath temple and the hot spring. Earlier pilgrims used to cross the Alaknanda to first reach the valley of Urvashi mountain. From there they reached Bamani village to cross the Rishi Ganga to ultimately enter Badrinath Puri. Across the Rishi Ganga lies Narayana mountain and in front of it is Nara mountain.

The new approach road to the temple is no longer clean. On both sides of it have mushroomed dhabas, hotels and shops. Beggars crowd on both sides of the bridge and create a lot of nuisance with their quarrels for space. Filth has increased. The whole town gets covered with dust emanating from heavy traffic. Hundreds of buses, and taxis also create a lot of noise. The soft, soothing 'Shri Badrinath Vishwambharam aarti' of the temple cannot now be heard outside. According to mythology, Maharishi Vyas got the Mahabharata written here with the help of Lord Ganesha. There still exist Ganesha cave and Vyas cave in Mana village close to Badrinath Dham. The mountain above Mana village is called Kuber Bhandar. According to the Mahabharata, Arjun took a substantial treasure from these mountain ranges, and thus acquired the name of Dhananjaya. There is a large rock here called Bhim Shila which serves as a bridge over the river Saraswati which flows in a very deep gorge. (This river is different and should





Neelkanth peak from Badrinath Dham framed by Urvashi mountain on the left and mount Narayana on the right.

not be mistaken for the legendary Saraswati, which became extinct.) The rock is also known as Bhim Setu. After crossing this rock bridge, one reaches the Vasudhara waterfall. Beyond, the trail leads to other valleys.

The object of worship in the Badrinath temple is a black stone idol of Lord Vishnu. Alongside is another statue of Narayana (Vishnu) cast from *ashtadhatu*. It is believed the stone idol was established here by Adi Shankaracharya. Ever since, followers of different sects come for worship here. The priest here has to be a Namboodri Brahmin from Kerala. He has to be a Brahmachari and a hermit. He has been given the title of Raval by the king of Tehri. The local people call the Raval 'Bulanda Narayana' or the speaking Narayana. The Raval has total control over the temple and enjoys great respect. Now there is a committee to assist the Raval.

The Seat of Shankaracharya

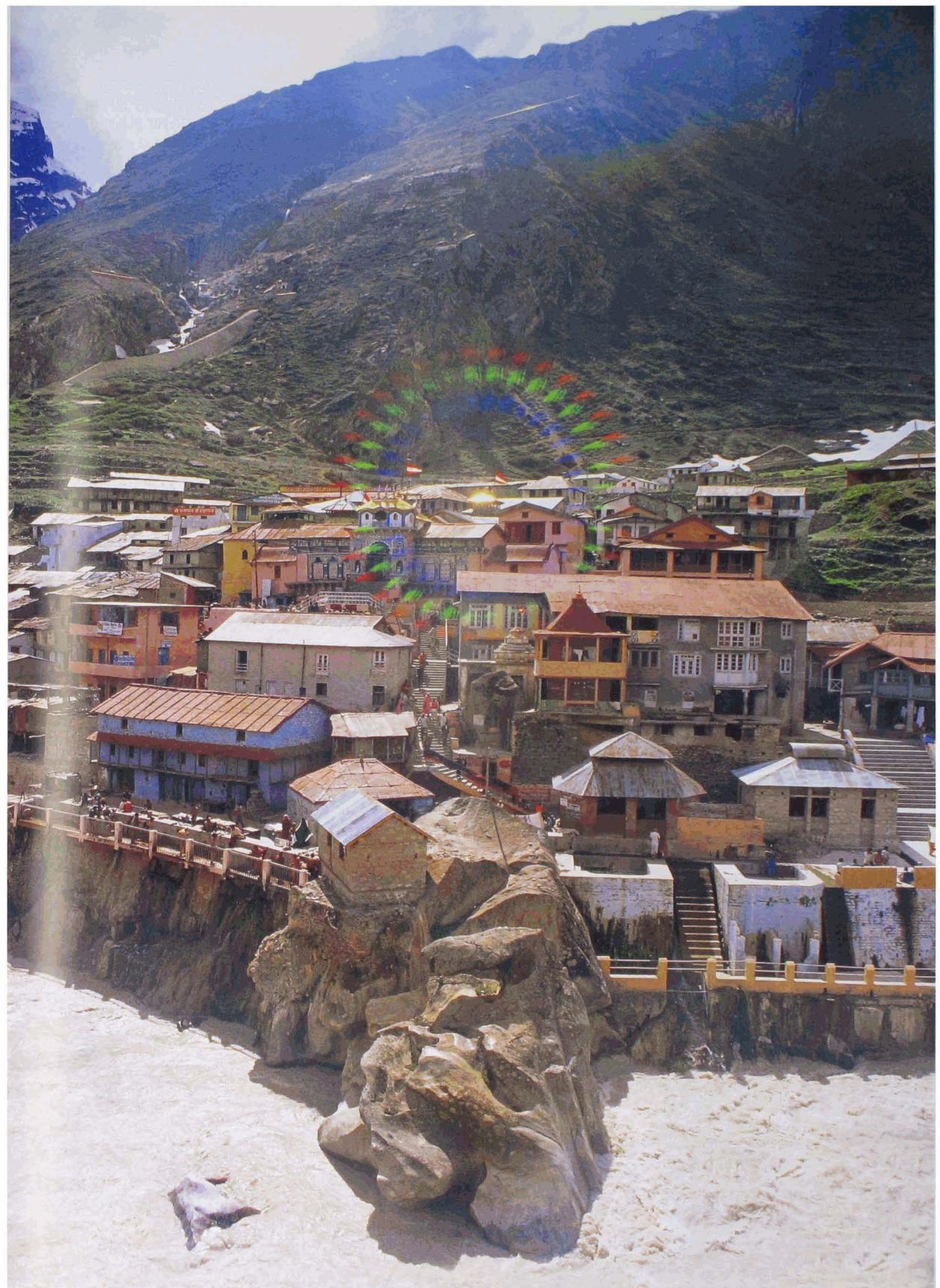
There is a Shivalaya nearby the hot spring below the Badrinath temple. The source of the hot spring is said to be underneath the temple. Near this spring is the residence of Ravalji. The seat of Adi Shankaracharya, known as Bhagvat Pad, is also here. In front of the hot spring are the Narad rock and the Kurma rock. Below the Narad rock is the Narad basin of the Alaknanda river, from which

NEXT TWO PAGES:

LEFT: The idol of Uddhav in Badrinath temple. It is traditionally shifted to Pandukeshwar for 6 months, when the Badrinath temple remains closed due to snow in extreme winter.

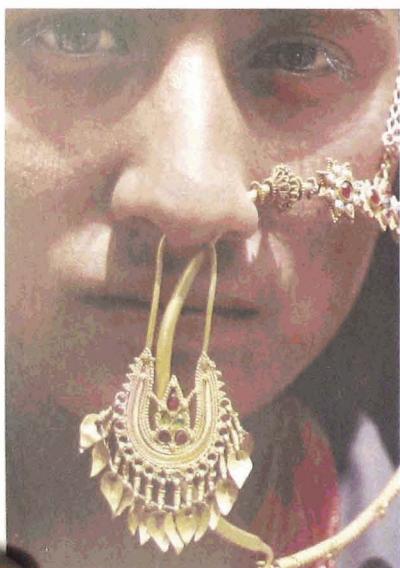
RIGHT: Narad Kund and Korma rock in the Alaknanda river in Badrinath Dham. About 1,250 years ago, it is said, Adi Shankaracharya salvaged a natural black stone idol of Vishnu from Narad Kund. He established the idol in the sanctum sanctorum of Badrinath temple, thus setting up the Jyotirdham.







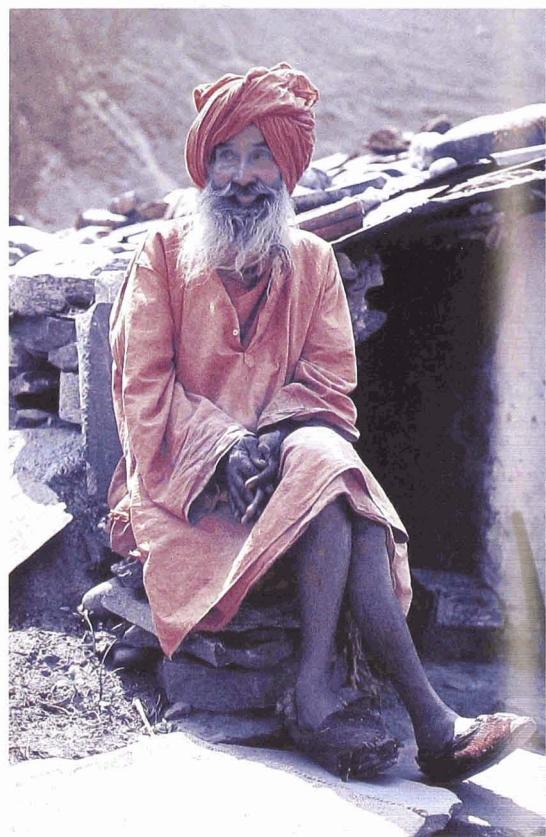
Once upon a time: a palash tree in bloom when Badrivan was thickly forested. Now it is completely denuded (pic 1958).



Symbols of status: a young Garhwal woman wears a 60 gm nose ring, a 30 gm middle piece supported by a 20 gm chain, all made of pure gold.

An ascetic, recluse and a great exponent of Vedas: Swami Shashvatananda of Badrinath Dham dwarfs his humble abode. He was the author's gurubhai.

Shankaracharya is said to have retrieved the black stone image of Lord Vishnu – also known as Badri – and had it installed in the temple. This place has been called Badrinath Dham ever since then. Even in modern times many ascetics made it their seat of meditation. Among them were the Gudariwale Mahatma, Swami Shashvatanand and Mauni Baba. Swami Paramanand, who symbolized the very essence of penance and asceticism, lived here in a small hut till the end of his life. Shashvatanand was a great devotee. When he related his experiences, the listeners could not control their tears. Swami Parvatikar invented the Rudraveena here. For 25 years he devotedly played the Rudraveena at the time of temple *aarti*. Often he would go into a trance playing the instrument. Astrologer Pandit Chakradhar Joshi and Shri Satyanarayana Babulkar were epitomes of wisdom. The administrators of the temple were always eager to provide all comforts to the pilgrims. When the author reached Badrinath from Gomukh, the temple administrators and the mahatmas gave him a big welcome.



Confluence of Three Rivers

Crossing the Bhim Setu over the Saraswati river near Mana village, one reaches the old route for Vasudhara waterfall. The water falls here from a height of about 900 ft. It is a magnificent sight. The ascent upto the fall is gentle but slippery. This is said to be the route that the five Pandavas and Draupadi are supposed to have taken to relinquish their bodies after the end of the great Mahabharata war. That is why it is called Swargarohan Marg (road to heaven). They took a bath, it is said, at Keshav Prayag, which is the confluence of three rivers – Vasudhara, Saraswati and Alaknanda. A more beautiful view of this confluence is obtained from the opposite bank of the Alaknanda. It goes through the valley behind the Badrinath temple. After an ascent of about one kilometre there is the confluence of Bhagirath glacier with other glaciers coming down from the Satopanth peak. The Alaknanda originates from this confluence and this area is called Alkapuri.

According to mythology, Alkapuri is the playground of Lord Indra, and the natural beauty of this place is indeed celestial. The Bhoj forest here is unique. The wind blowing through the Bhoj leaves produces pleasant music. It is surprising that this forest is situated at 17,000-18,000 ft. Nowhere else can one find Bhoj trees at such a height. It is a lush green forest abounding in beds of

Will they make it? Mountaineers on the legendary path to heaven, known as Swargarohan marg on Satopanth glacier. This is the route the five Pandavas, with wife Draupadi and their faithful dog, traversed on their final journey. Only Yudhishtira the eldest Pandava and the dog made it to heaven bodily. Others died on the way.





Leaves within leaves. Archa, a medicinal plant, is also edible and considered a delicacy.

A rugged bridge of peaks.

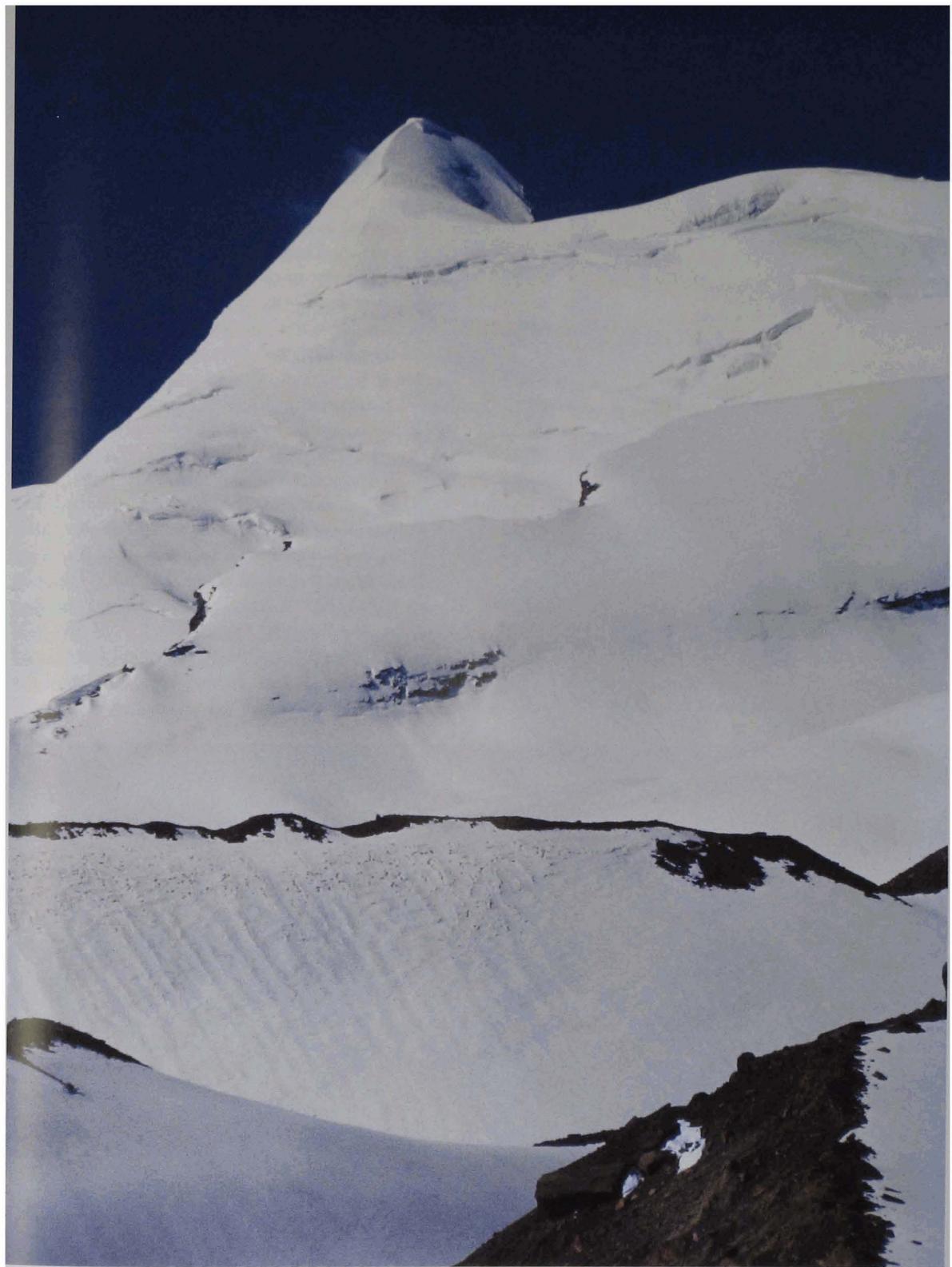
colourful flowers and creepers. In earlier times the Mana villagers used to collect their fuel wood from here. When Mana women used to sing in chorus, it seemed like divine music. The Badri forest has been destroyed, but this Bhoj forest has survived mainly because of its high altitude. Guru Tapovanam Maharaj loved this forest. He used to camp here occasionally. He did not consider the Bhoj trees as lifeless, but had endearing ways of addressing them in Sanskrit. The mountain on which this forest grows is called Sau-kunni. There are many small and big waterfalls here and small lakes in the valley. Thick soft grass on the banks of these lakes gives the impression that green carpets have been laid out. In fact the beauty of Alkapuri is indescribable and has been rendered by the great Sanskrit poet Kalidas in his famous work Meghdoot. Here Yaksha requested the clouds moving towards the north to carry the love-message to his beloved at Alkapuri.

Visitors to Alkapuri must carry with them tents, heavy woollens, sleeping bags and enough food, otherwise they can get into trouble with the weather worsening. If the Himalaya are beautiful, they are also merciless. Challenging the Himalaya is inviting death. One can be saved from many hardships if accompanied by an experienced guide. Only true renunciants can travel alone.

Satopanth Glacier – The Road to Heaven

To the south of the Alkapuri area is Satopanth glacier. To its right is the Ransi Daur cave. This is a unique cave with sand instead of stone at its entrance. Within the cave too there is sand and fine soil. The cave is large enough to accommodate 30-40 people. Above the cave is Bhagirath mountain. The Pandavas and





The holy Satopanth Taal. Mana villagers immerse the horoscopes of their dead relatives here after performing elaborate rites. One of the four Chaukhamba peaks towers above the frozen lake.



Temptation unlimited – luscious apples in the garden of Tapovan Kuti at Gangotri, the author's residence.

Sau-Kunni mountain seen from the route to heaven – Swargarohan Marg, which finds mention in the epic Mahabharat.

Draupadi are said to have come here while seeking expiation. This area is also a part of the Swargarohan Marg.

To the left of the Satopanth peak is the towering Neelkanth peak. Neelkanth is another name of Lord Shiva. He got this name when his neck turned blue after swallowing poison obtained from the epic churning of the ocean. Indian mountaineers have climbed this peak. In the valley of Neelkanth is the triangular Satopanth lake, nearly a kilometre in perimetre. At a height of 15,000-16,000 ft, it remains frozen or covered with snow most of the time. It is considered auspicious to take a bath in this lake. The author has taken a bath in the half-frozen lake. He was accompanied by coolies who had brought with them their family idols. They dipped their idols in the lake and floated in it horoscopes of their departed relatives. The villagers believe such action provides salvation to their ancestors.

At one end of Satopanth glacier the Chaukhamba peak seems to be touching the sky. This peak is also called Swargakhamba, Kaivalya Dham or Badrinath Chaukhamba. The area above Satopanth lake is totally snowbound. The rocks of ice are hard. The climb ahead involves crossing these rocks which are delicately balanced. When they crack they make a loud noise and can cause a landslide anytime. After a climb of about four kilometres one reaches two small lakes called Chandra Kund and Surya Kund.

According to the Mahabharata, Draupadi collapsed and died after leaving Satopanth lake. None of the Pandava brothers stopped to help her, and the venerated eldest brother Yudhishtira did not even look back. Exhausted and trembling with cold, one by one the



brothers Nakul, Sahdev and Arjun also fell down and died. The mighty Bhim also embraced death a little further up. Only Yudhishtira remained along with a dog who had accompanied him since the beginning of the journey. Yudhishtira took a bath in the Surya and Chandra Kunds and climbed ahead along with the dog. The Mahabharata relates that he reached the gate of heaven along with the dog. When invited to enter heaven, he refused to do so without his faithful dog. Since the dog was none other than Yamraj, the God of Death himself in disguise, he was greatly pleased at Yudhishtira passing this stiff test with flying colours. Thus, instead of just his soul entering, he was allowed to enter heaven with his mortal body.

The Way to Mansarovar

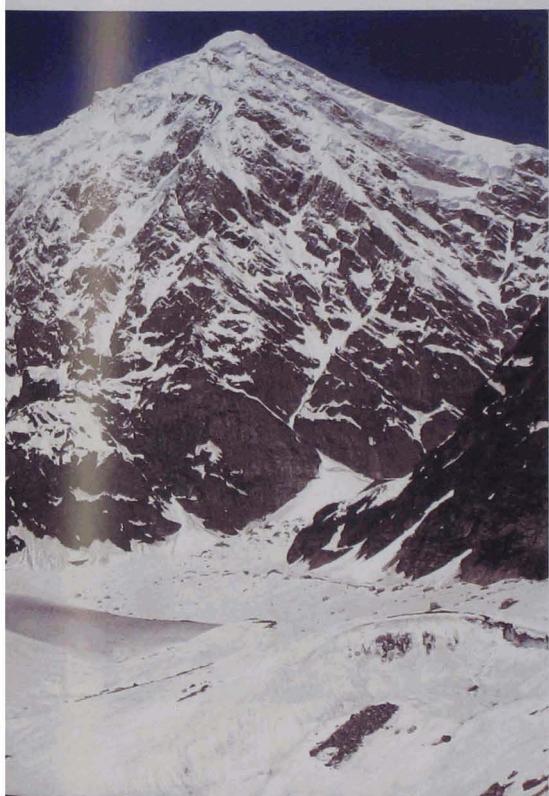
The Saraswati river flows in a deep chasm below Mana village. The Saraswati river brings water from the slopes of glaciers and peaks like Raktakunna, Gandha Mardan, Nilambar and Mukut. After a climb of half a kilometre northwards along the river, one reaches a wooden footbridge over the river. Across the



Bhagirath Kharak mountain and Satopanth glacier along Swargarohan Marg.

The final ascent on Swargarohan Marg. Somewhere beyond lies the gateway to heaven.

There are two lakes below Chaukhamba main peak — Chandrakund and Suryakund, which remain frozen most of the year.



FACING PAGE:

TOP: The Nandadevi Raj Jat procession as it passes through a valley of flowers and the heights of Homkund (17,000 ft). In the background is the mountain range of Kumari Pass. Also see pages iv and 3.

BOTTOM: Bhutkesh: a highly aromatic medicinal plant (ht 15,000 ft).

bridge is a large green plain enriched by many kinds of plants and herbs. Mana villagers bring their horses, mules, yaks and sheep to graze here. This is one of the old routes to Kailash-Mansarovar which is now closed. Thanks to the arrangements made by the Raval of Badrinath, Guru Tapovanam Maharaj was able to make his first trip to Kailash-Mansarovar through this route. About 26 kms from the plain where Mana villagers graze their livestock is the India-Tibet border pass. The ancient name of Tibet, according to Hindu mythology, is Tripistoop. The old king of Tripistoop, Raja Bhagdatta, is said to have taken part in the Mahabharata war.

Kailash mountain and the Mansarovar lake have unique, divine beauty. No mountain or lake in the world can be compared with them. In olden days, Tibetan Buddhist monks and devotees lived here but they had all become used to comforts and luxury. According to the travel account of Guru Tapovanam Maharaj, it was wrongly held in India that most of them were very enlightened beings with extraordinary powers. Besides, in those days, Tibet was dominated by bandits who often looted travellers. However they spared sadhus and ascetics. Once a group of bandits gave food to Tapovanam Maharaj.

Nandadevi Raj Jat

The Alaknanda, flowing down in the middle Himalaya from Badrinath, touches five Prayags on the way. These Prayags are situated at the confluence of the Alaknanda with five other rivers, and are called Vishnu Prayag, Nanda Prayag, Karna Prayag, Rudra Prayag and Dev Prayag. There is a way from the south of Karna Prayag to the Nandadevi sanctuary. On this road lies a village called Nauti. It is from this village that the Nandadevi Raj Jat (Nandadevi Royal Farewell

A lake in Bedani Bugyal where the participants of Nandadevi Raj Jat perform 'tarpan for pitris' (peace to departed souls), and pay homage to devatas and rishis.

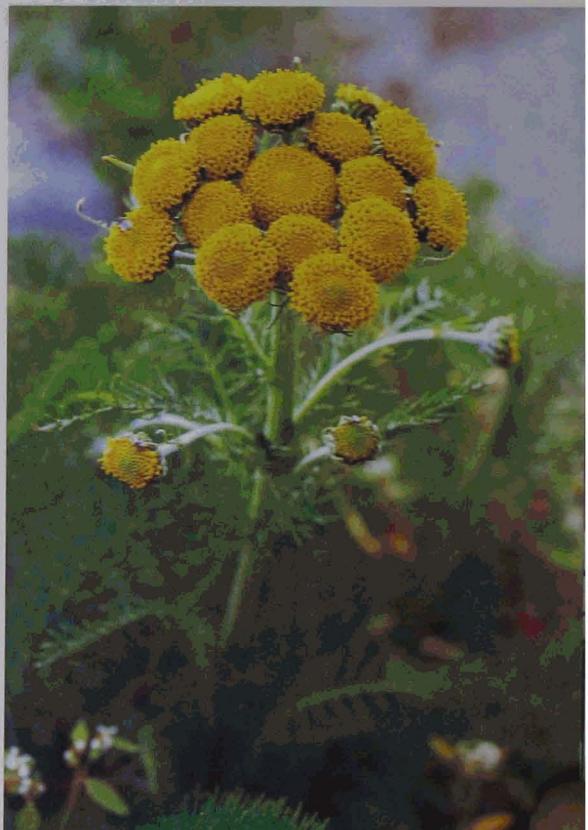


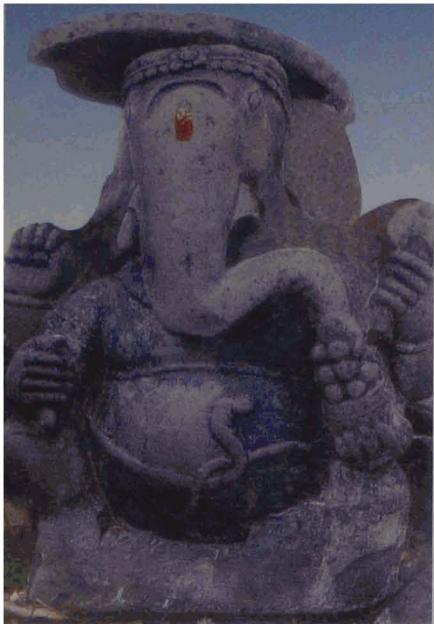


Festival March) begins. The Nandadevi Raj Jat that this author joined, took place after 19 years, instead of the normal 12 years. Some people even made a film of the event – it was so unusual for them.

The march takes place with great fanfare. There is a very interesting tradition behind this festival. If a four-horned ram is born to some villager's ewe – and it generally happens after every 12 years – then it is considered an incarnation of Parvati, the consort of Lord Shiva. The ewe is nursed with great care and is worshipped. The procession is led by this four-horned ram who is called Chausingha Khadu in the local language. Women are not permitted to take part in the Nandadevi Raj Jat. After joining the march in the beginning, they turn back at the Bakra Gad village in Bedani bugyal. Those who handle the carriages of gods and goddesses climb barefoot all the way. The great festival of bidding farewell to this 'Parvati in ram form' and escorting it to the abode of Lord Shiva is then held with great rejoicing. Aarti is performed in every village on the way. Artistic umbrellas carried in the procession are made of ringal, a cane type of plant.

The Nandadevi march is a very tough journey of 10-12 days. On the way camps are set up on the ridges of villages, forests, bugyals and mountains for hundreds of people accompanying the procession. They eat and sleep in these camps. At night the camp looks like a town, but with daybreak it is dismantled as the march





Kalua Vinayak

A priest and devotees participating in the Nandadevi Raj jat, give a fitting send-off to Parvati on her marriage to Lord Shiva at a camp in Bedani bugyal.

is resumed. There is a lake on the way in the famous Bedani bugyal. There are several other lakes in the valleys of surrounding mountains. All participants in the procession make offerings here to their departed relatives. It is a fantastic sight. Further on, there is a place called Baguavasa. The view of the Himalayan ranges from here is breathtaking. There are some caves also on the way.

The rare and sacred Sthal Kamal (land lotus) abounds in the forests and bugyals through which the procession passes. Devotees pluck these flowers for offerings. According to a popular belief prevalent here, the king of Kannauj had once come to join this procession along with his soldiers. The Devi is said to have been angered by the licentiousness of the king and caused his destruction along with his whole troop. Folk songs are sung now relating this tale. The pits appearing after a climb of 4-5 kms after Baguavasa are said to be the sites where the king's dancing girls sank into the earth.

Kalua Vinayak (Black Ganapati)

After Baguavasa is the Roopkund mountain and the famous Roopkund lake. On the ridge of Roopkund mountain has been established a black stone idol of Lord Ganesha. This idol is called Kalua Vinayak or Black Ganapati. Interestingly, it remains out in the open and is not placed in any temple. The Nandadevi Raj Jat proceeds only after paying homage to the Black Ganapati. This place at 17,000 ft is very cold and remains snow-covered in winters. It is normal for travellers to become breathless at this height; headaches and vomitings are also common. Naturally, the Nandadevi Raj Jat slows down here.





*A mosaic of colourful terraces.
Farming of ramdana, kuttu and papara,
the staple foodgrains in Garhwal.*

Roopkund Lake

Roopkund lake is circular in shape with a depression in the middle. Three sides of the lake remain covered with snow even in summers and thus make these sides of the lake inaccessible. Visitors use the side strewn with boulders and rocks to reach the water. In winter, the lake freezes. Roopkund is known for the human skeletons, skulls and other bones found in the water. Stories about ghosts have been prevalent here for a long time. The superstition about ghosts was defied for the first time by Swami Pranavananda of Kailash-Mansarovar fame who did research here and opened the way for others to travel to Roopkund. He recovered skulls, human bones and other articles in use during olden times from the lake. He transferred these finds to the security of a private museum in Hyderabad. It has not yet been ascertained whose remains these are and in what age or period and in what circumstances these human beings came to grief. According to one belief, these are remains of the troops of Senapati Zorawar Singh.

Beautiful flowers adorn the banks of this lake. One of these flowers, Atish, has medicinal qualities. Climbing on the right flank of the lake, one reaches a narrow ridge which is known as Zorawar Gully. At the end of this ledge is a sloping plain. After descending for 4-5 kms, one reaches a vast green open field which is approximately 25 sq kms in area. The local name of this green is Seela Samudra (ocean). There are innumerable springs and rivulets here flowing from the glaciers around. There is a large variety of shrubs and flowers as well. On one side of the Seela Samudra is the Nandadevi mountain range from whose glaciers the Nandini river is fed. On the other side are the Kumaon Himalaya. The snow-clad peaks

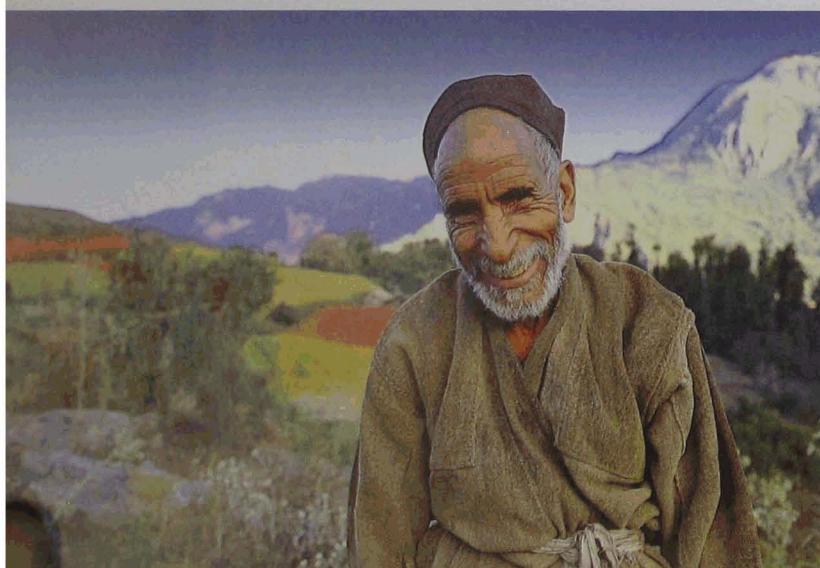
Pistachio flowers – as delicate as the pistachio taste.





For trekkers this valley is a visual delight. For farmers it is a season's hard labour.

Wizened yet cheerful farmer.



appear to be towering over one's head. The beauty of this place which remains exceedingly cold even in summers, is divine. The night camp of the Nandadevi Raj Jat is set up in Seela Samudra. It is difficult to spend the night here without a good sleeping bag. However, deeply religious people, strengthened by their faith, face the cold with an ordinary blanket and the clothes they are wearing, after eating just a frugal meal. From Seela Samudra the procession leaves early in the morning for Kumari Pass.

There is a tradition of throwing butterballs on a rock on the way to Kumari Pass. It is believed if the butter sticks to the rock, the concerned person's journey will be auspicious and successful. After Kumari Pass one reaches Homkund lake. On the right of the Homkund is Trishul peak and on the left is Kamet. A mere glimpse of these tall peaks sends a thrill right through the spine.

Tearful Farewell

After a fire sacrifice and other rituals, the Chausingha Khadu, considered an incarnation of Parvati, is bid farewell with

great emotion and faith. The ram is draped in pretty clothes and garlanded, and make up is applied. People even touch its feet and perambulate round it. Bags laden on its back are filled with items of Parvati's dowry and food for her. Many people get highly emotional at this farewell ceremony and cry openly. In fact, the farewell moves everyone who has joined the Nandadevi Raj Jat.

The chief priest and his associates tie a rope round the ram's neck and take it far away from the crowd. This is a heart-rending sight. As they try to leave the ram behind, it tries to run back towards the crowd and the people with whom it had been for so many days. It doesn't want to remain alone in the mountains. Since it is the tradition to leave the ram alone, the priest and others tie him to a boulder under the shelter of a rock and return. The other participants of the event also return with a heavy heart. A major portion of the offerings made in the name of the ram is given to its owner.

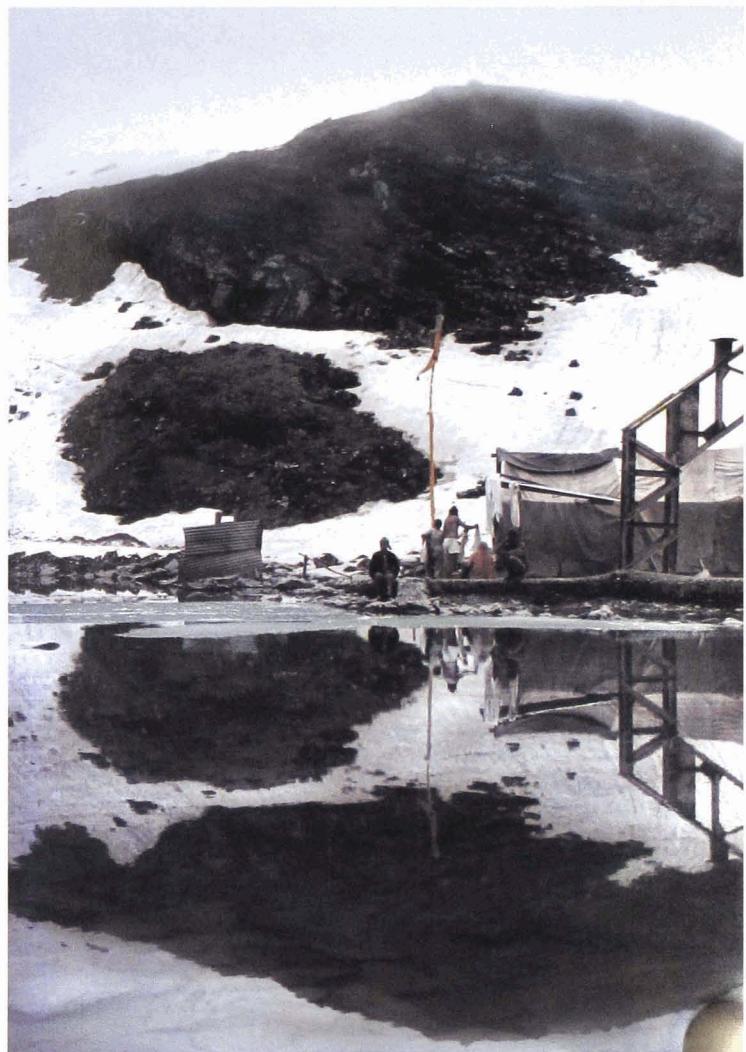
The return journey takes a different route. It wends its way along the banks of the Nandini river down to a place called Ghat, which was once a *chatti* on the way to Badrinath. From here people return to their homes. On this route the local people grow ramdaana, a popular grain in these hills. The ramdaana flowers in the fields make a beautiful sight. However, the villagers here are mainly non-vegetarian. They hunt deer and other animals in the forests and bugyals. No wonder the number of deer here has dwindled considerably.

Back to the Plains – Srinagar

Once the administrative centre of the British, Srinagar still has a prominent place in Garhwal. The town has expanded and progressed a great deal in the last 50 years. It is situated in an open valley at 6,000 ft. The town suffers from problems related to quick rise in population, like water shortage. There are old educational institutions here and the people are generally educated and prosperous. One road from here leads to Pauri which is a hill-town of medium size. From Pauri, descending to the plains, one can reach Lansdowne which is a cantonment. Lansdowne is cool and green. There is a nursery here for fruit plants.

In the foothills of Lansdowne lie the Jim Corbett Park and the Rajaji Sanctuary. Tigers and elephants, among other animals, can be seen in the Corbett Park, which is better organized than the Rajaji Sanctuary. The natural balance remains protected here. However, the neighbouring Rajaji Park is being destroyed by cowherds who freely bring their cows and buffaloes for grazing here. Close to Lansdowne is Kotdwar where there is a thick forest. Rishi Kanya, it is believed, had his ashram here. The marriage of legendary king Dushyant and Shakuntala is said to have taken place in the ashram of Rishi Kanya. ☐

The Lokpal Hemkund lake (ht 14,000 ft), surrounded by seven mountain peaks has been a popular Sikh pilgrimage for the last 30 years or so. The girders for the construction of the Gurudwara can be seen on the right (pic 1962). Earlier it was known for an ancient Lakshman temple.

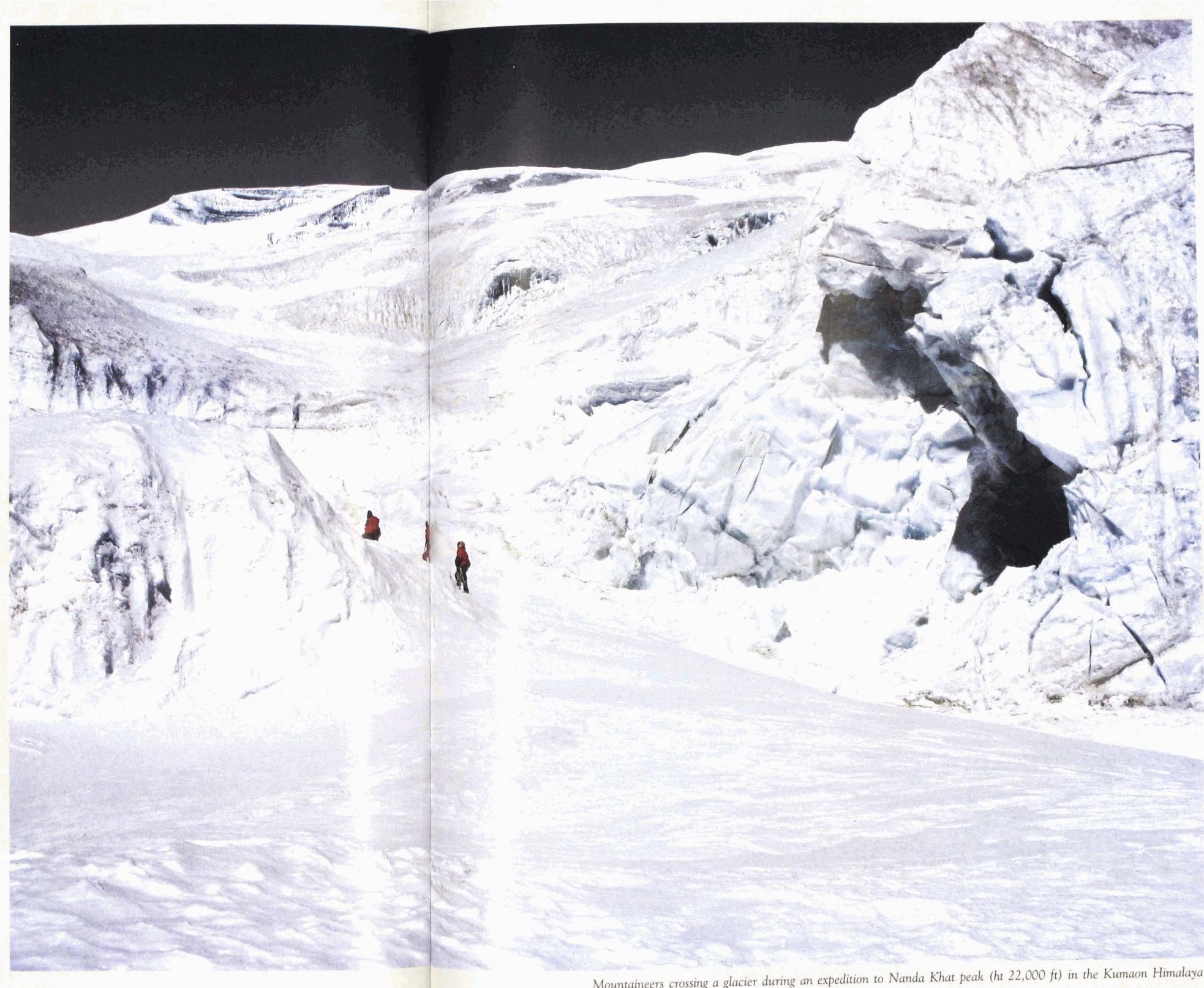


Tourists Delight— Kumaon and Other Regions

Kumaon too is a beautiful part of the Himalaya. Because of its broad valleys, Kumaon's economy is largely agricultural. There are farms and orchards on the mountain slopes. Several places have rich forests comprising of trees like Pine, Fir, Burans and many creepers. Apart from Nainital, there are other lakes in Kumaon, such as Bhim Taal and Naukuchia Taal.

The tour of the Kumaon region of the Himalaya begins from the foothills of Nainital, the hill station that boasts of the famous Naini lake from which it derives its name. Naini lake is a unique creation of Nature. The town situated around the lake and on the slopes of the surrounding mountain has grown very big. In summers with the arrival of tourists its population burgeons into lakhs. The sewage of the town falls mostly into the lake leading to its rapid pollution. Its water, which was once crystal clear, now appears muddy and even gives out a foul smell. Soil erosion has occurred extensively due to cutting of trees on the slopes. There is the Cheena mountain top from where a very pleasing view of the town is available. On the lake side is the temple of Nandadevi. There once existed a tradition of sacrificing a buffalo calf during the *navratras*. Animal sacrifice is a heartless act. One fails to understand, how can any god be pleased from the slaughter of any creature?

Mukteshwar is a cold place at 6 to 7 thousand feet but suffers from water shortage. On two sides it has very steep valleys and on the other two sides sloping plains. There are many old temples in Baijnath, another tourist attraction in Kumaon, which draws a large number of tourists. Ranikhet and Almora are the chief towns and administrative centres. Ranikhet is an elegant place. There is a cantonment here. Gandhiji had lived in Ranikhet for sometime. There are 8-10 old temples on the banks of the Chandrabhaga river. The Parvati idol here is known for its fine sculpture and beauty. Almora, apart from being an administrative unit, is also a centre for education.



Mountaineers crossing a glacier during an expedition to Nanda Khat peak (ht 22,000 ft) in the Kumaon Himalaya.



Are they foolish to risk their lives or are they brave? Mountaineers finding precarious footholds while climbing the rocky terrain during Nanda Khat expedition. The layman's perception: they are foolish if dead, brave if successful.

A seer called Neem Karoli Baba lived near Almora at a place called Kainchi. He is said to have obtained the blessings of Lord Hanuman. There are many ashrams here of learned sadhus. There is a very pretty plateau called Binsar 35 kms from Almora.

From Almora there is a way to Pindari glacier, Trails Pass and the peaks of Baljori, Sundar Doonga, Panvali Dwar, Nandakhat, Nandadevi and Chan-guch. Nandadevi peak in fact is a group of peaks called Nandadevi Ring by mountaineers. On this route there is a place called Kaphkot from where a road goes to Pithoragarh, on Nepal's western border. This is the route used these days for travelling to Kailash-Mansarovar. In this part of Kumaon are popular hill stations like Kausani, Bageshwar, Sitalakhet and Jageshwar.

For Pindari glacier, the Pindar river has to be crossed at Kaphkot. The road leads to Luhari Khet and on the way lies Pindari glacier. This road can also be used to reach the higher valleys and peaks of Kumaon. One can even reach Neelam glacier with a little change of direction. A magnificent view of the Kumaon Himalaya is obtained from a place called Dakuri.

Trails Pass is named after an English administrator who crossed this pass to reach Pithoragarh. Actually, this Pass was not his discovery. Before him many local people had travelled by it. The last village on the way to Pindari is Khati. There are many beautiful waterfalls after this village. Once, during an expedition, the author and some of his friends had to prepare a makeshift bridge by placing the long trunk of a tree across the Pindari river. The old wooden bridge had been

A Himalayan beauty with full glory in display.



swept away. There is no habitation beyond Khati village. There are only two dak bungalows in Dwali and Purkiya where one can take shelter in an emergency. Purkiya lies in a beautiful forest of shrubs and Burans trees.

Pindari Glacier

Pindari glacier is situated in a vast valley. On both its banks are large plains of grass which are used as grazing grounds by the neighbouring villagers. The base camp for the expedition to Baljori peak is set up at this very ground on the edge of the glacier. The plain on the right is called Sadhu Gufa. It takes three days' hard climb to reach Baljori peak (21,000 ft). From here the Panwali Dwar and Sundar Doonga peaks look so close that one is tempted to reach out to them. The assessment of distance on such heights in Himalaya is extremely misleading. On this climb one encounters snow crevasses which are so deep, they seem to reach down to Patal Lok. These crevasses are a big danger to the mountaineers. To avoid them one has to take long detours. On the left there is a rocky slope up to the Pindar river the very sight of which is scary. Walking on the ridge in between is like walking on a razor's edge. If by ill luck the weather worsens, it becomes pitch dark and the snow clouds make a rustling sound. It is normal to have snowfall of upto two feet close to the peak. The temperature plummets after a snowstorm. Beard and moustache become white with snow.

However if the weather is clear, one can see clearly the green Kumaon valley for about 100 kms. In the north innumerable peaks appear like pearls in a necklace. The descent from Baljori is equally dangerous. Landslides are common



A lucky encounter. Cobras are very rare at high altitudes. This one was spotted in Bukki.

Man's ingenuity pitted against the mountain's raw challenge. Success can sometimes hinge on the strength of a feather-weight ladder.





Intertwined destinies.

The national flag and picture of goddess Durga planted on the peak marks the successful culmination of the Nandakhat expedition in 1971. In the background is Chang-guch peak.

between Sadhu Gufa and Zero Point. A hail of stones and pebbles keeps falling down. It is in these conditions that one has to cross the Pindari glacier and begin the expedition to the Nandakhat peak.

Nandakhat Peak

One has to pray for life on the extremely difficult climb to Nandakhat peak. After the base camp, another three camps have to be set up on the snowy route. It is difficult to sleep here. The third camp is set up at a place on a glacier from where emanate the sound of a river and a waterfall. On one of his trips the author had to set up camp here along with his companions. In spite of the danger of sudden cracking of ice, there was no alternative

other than this site. The last camp too had to be set up in the valley of the peak, where ice had to be melted to make tea. No member of the expedition slept at night as the last lap of the climb for the Nandakhat peak had to begin at 4 a.m. At such a height it takes one hour to dress up and wear one's shoes because the limbs get numb. Here, lack of experience may prove deadly. The challenge of climbing snow-clad mountains has to be met with strong will power. Physical prowess alone does not count much. One gets breathless cutting ice for steps; the lips get dry, even speech requires great effort. Vomiting causes weakness, the muscles slacken, tears stream down from the eyes and they feel hot; hands and feet get numb and turn blue from the cold. Taking a step seems like picking up a heavy load. One could be blown away by the fierce winds. The greatest fear one has is lest all of one's strength should fail. In such circumstances even the



physically strong lose heart and can endanger the success of the entire expedition. A small error on the part of the mountaineer can claim his life.

The task of moving ahead is even more dangerous. One spiral occurs after another, one crevasse makes way for another and wave after wave of ice walls keep coming, making one feel that one would never be able to reach the peak. The snow-glasses, watch, camera and water bottle etc. seem so heavy that one repeatedly feels like throwing them away. At such times only a great resolve works. Precautions should never be given up. Taking daredevil risks on a mountain is to put the whole team in danger. We began the last lap of the expedition by bowing down before the peak and praying thus, "O, Nandadevi, although we are guilty of trampling on you with our feet, still we are coming to take refuge in thy lap, please protect us."

The structure of Nandakhat peak is unique. In front of the twin peaks of Nandadevi East and Nandadevi West is a snowy plain in the shape of a large bed. That is why the name Nandakhat (*khat* means a bed). This plain is about one kilometre long and half a kilometre broad. There is a sharp edge between the two peaks walking on which is like embracing death. On reaching Nandakhat peak we placed an offering of five fruits, a copy of the Gita, ochre clothes, and unfurled the national flag besides taking photographs of all sides. We again prayed to Nandadevi with folded hands to ensure our safe return. Night overtook us on descent and we lost our way. We had to climb down an ice wall with the help of a rope. Touching the ground never felt so good.

Narayana Ashram

One road from Ranikhet leads to Tawaghat which is situated on the banks of Kali Nadi. Further ahead is Narayana Ashram on the new route to Kailash-Mansarovar. In the olden days, Narayana Ashram used to make arrangements and provide all help to sadhus and others for their journey to Kailash-Mansarovar. The ashram is ideally located in a beautiful vegetated area. The administrator of the ashram, Swami Narayana was a great devotee of Lord Shiva. He gave up his life while actively engaged in singing praises of the Lord. Now Swami Tadrupananda, a disciple of Swami Chinmayananda, manages the ashram.

Mansarovar

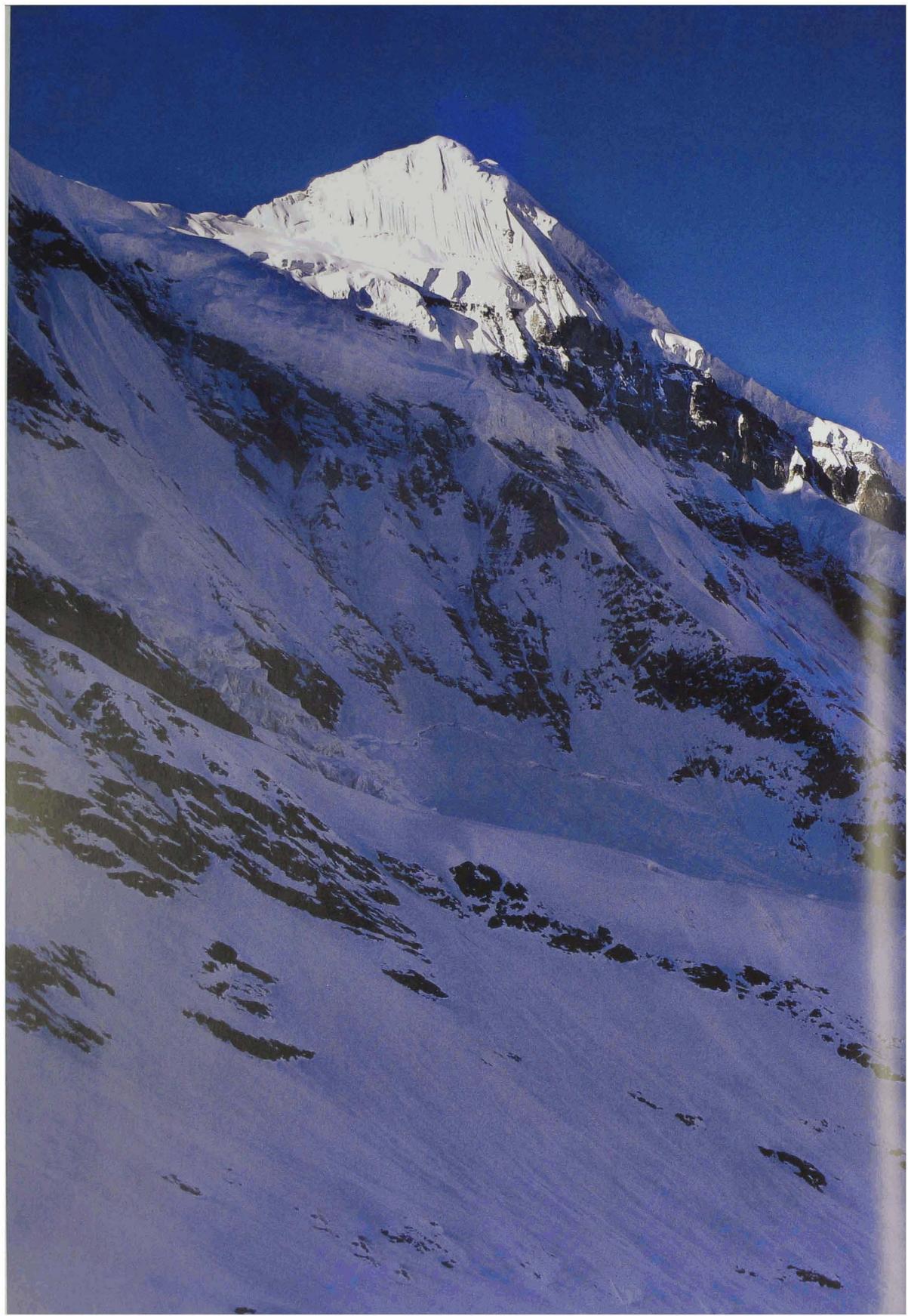
Swami Pranavananda made the trip to Kailash-Mansarovar 32 times. For many years he lived on the banks of Mansarovar lake even in winters and conducted research on it. He was the one to discover the grave of General Zorawar Singh on the banks of the lake. For his work of research, the Jadhavpur University



Unlike fresh snow this hardened ice has become fragile and can crumble at any moment, causing a major avalanche. On the way to Nanda Khat.

NEXT TWO PAGES:
LEFT: Nanda Khat peak catches the morning sun.

RIGHT: A pointed tip that is deceptive. The peak looks triangular and pointed from this angle but is actually flat at the top. The Panvalidwar peak close to Baljori peak.







A group of villagers from Malari
(Niti Hoti pass) above Joshimath.

FACING PAGE:

Kailash peak in the upper
Himalaya of Tibet, as seen from
the circumambulation route.
Those who are able to undertake the
pilgrimage to Kailash Mansarovar are
considered lucky and blessed indeed.

Aum Parvat on the Kailash-
Mansarovar route via Pithoragarh.
Snow falls on the mountain and lasts
only in the form of

honoured him with an honorary doctorate. It has been mentioned earlier that he also conducted research on Roopkund.

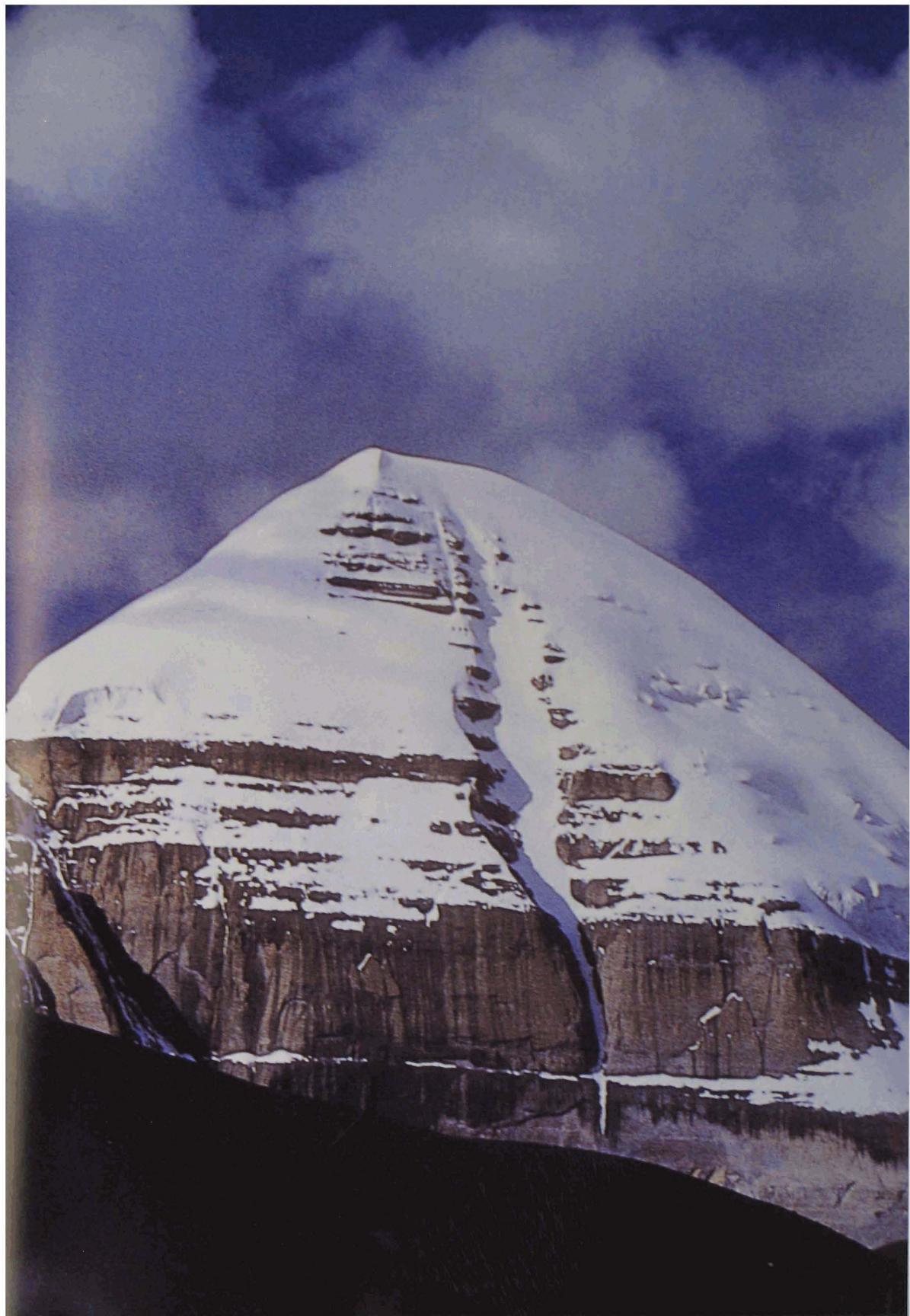
Swami Pranavananda gauged the depth of Mansarovar lake at several points and also measured the temperature of its water. He discovered that there are hot water springs at several places at the bottom of the lake which is why it doesn't freeze in winters. The water freezes only at the edges of the lake. In the year that he did research some frozen areas in the lake stood up in the shape of tents and there were explosions also in it. The Swami had managed to take with him an eight horse power motor boat to help him in his research. It was he who revealed for the first time that the circumference of the lake is 72 kms and that it gives birth to not one but four rivers! Prominent among these rivers is Ganga-Chu.

The Ganga-Chu river is considered as sacred by the Buddhists of Tibet as the Ganga is considered by the Indians. They bow down before it in reverence. Circumambulation around Kailash mountain and Mansarovar lake takes months and is accomplished on the strength of religious faith and determination only, in spite of the physical pain and hazards involved. The Ganga-Chu river is not very long. It runs for 26 kms from Mansarovar lake and falls into Rakshas Taal (devil lake). The Rakshas lake is also very large but it is considered impure. Its water is not used for worship or offerings. The reason for this is not known. After Pranavananda, it was Swami Tapovanam Maharaj who gave an authoritative account of the geographical situation of the area and drew maps of the many routes and rivers.

Holy Kailash

Kailash mountain with its eternally snow-covered peak is one of the most beautiful sights in the world. The view is spell binding. The peak shines like a







An ice cream cone for gods to enjoy.
Its flavour: celestial.

jewel. It is believed to be the abode of Lord Shiva. Both the Hindu and Buddhist traditions do not allow climbing on this mountain out of reverence.

Kailash is a part of the Mandhata-Gurla range of Himalaya in the north-most region. Further up north is Tibet. In the early days there were rock-shelters of Buddhist monks on the banks of the Mansarovar lake. Many of these caves have now been destroyed. Fifty years ago herds of wild horses and deer roamed around here. There were other animals also, but now there are very few left. There is the famous Tholinga or Naulinga monastery on the banks of the lake known for its association with hundreds of idols of Hindu gods and goddesses. There is one idol which is always curtained off. In ancient times it was believed that anyone looking at the idol could faint or even die. Even the priest is not allowed to look at this idol.

No Swans

Mythologically, there is a belief that there is a swan-like bird called Rajhans in the Mansarovar which eats only pearls. But according to Swami Pranavananda and Swami Tapovanam Maharaj, the belief is unfounded. No bird of that kind has been sighted here. If ever there was such a special swan, it must have become extinct in the distant past. Today a catlike creature can be found here whose fur is very soft and warm and it is therefore hunted for its fur.

Brahmakamals on target:
author reflecting on the best way of capturing their fragrant magnificence while on the way to Roopkund.



Eastwards in Himalaya

Nepal Himalaya: The Himalayan area adjoining Kumaon is part of Nepal. It boasts of the world's highest peak, Sagarmatha. It is referred to as Gauri Shankar peak in the Mahabharata. In Tibet this peak is called Chomo-lungma, which means mother goddess in Tibetan language. The current and popular name of this peak is Everest and it is 29,028 ft (8,848 m) in height. For decades, it remained a big challenge for anyone to climb this peak, and the feat was finally accomplished by a British expedition on 29th May, 1953. Since then many mountaineers, both men and women of various countries have successfully climbed this peak. Conquering Mount Everest is a very hazardous undertaking. Even with the acquisition of the latest and most sophisticated equipment for climbing, every year there are incidents of mountaineers dying while making an attempt on the peak.

There is Kumbhi glacier below Everest which is now melting very rapidly. Sadly, hundreds of tons of waste and litter is lying about on this glacier, thanks to numerous international expeditions. Apart from Everest there are many other high peaks and glaciers which are the source of several rivers. The high mountains as well as foothills are beautiful. These are a great attraction particularly for the western tourists.

Kathmandu

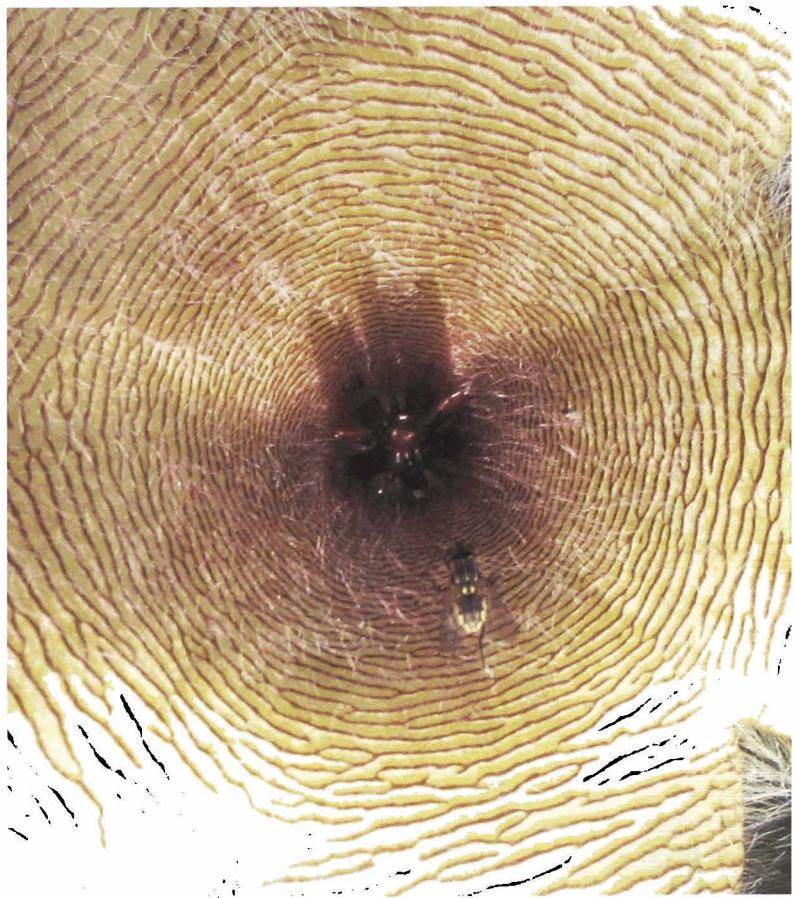
Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, is situated in a large, saucer-shaped valley. For the religiously inclined, its main attraction is the ancient temple of Pashupati Nath, another name of Lord Shiva. Kathmandu is a major pilgrimage centre for Hindus because of this temple. The King of Nepal, moving in a procession, makes a ritual trip for worship at Pashupati Nath temple. It is believed that the king runs the country as a servant of Pashupati Nath. The temple and its idols are made of wood (*kath*), and that is why the name of the city. The temple is on the banks of the Bagmati river which has very little water and that too is polluted. The river comes into full flow only during the rainy season. Here too the priests are traditionally Lingayat Brahmins from Karnataka state in south India. The first such appointment was made by Adi Shankaracharya himself.

It is believed that before Shankaracharya united all Hindu faiths into one and propagated *advaitavaad* (oneness of God), the Hindu pilgrimage centres were dominated by Kapaliks and Brahma Kapaliks. At variance with the traditions and beliefs prevailing at that time the Shankaracharya promoted *advaitavaad*. He came to Kathmandu from Varanasi via Gorakhpur and Veernagar.



Fruit of a medicinal plant. It is poisonous yet useful for treating blood cancer.

Is this cactus flower's well of nectar full or dry? A honeybee decides to find out.



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Mountaineers at International Mountaineering Meet put their signatures on a photograph of mount Everest (pic 1972).

Gorakhnath

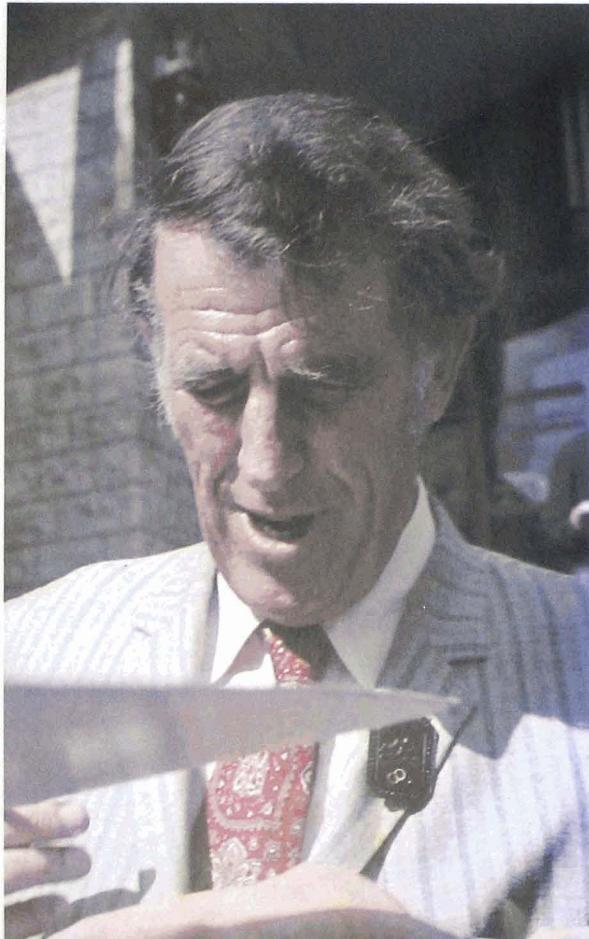
There is a big following of Guru Gorakhnath in Nepal. The ascetics following the Gorakhnath tradition belong to the Nath Sampradaya. They wear large earrings. At the time of Shivaratri, sadhus of six sects gather in Kathmandu. The names of these sects are: Sanyasi, Vairagi, Udasi, Shakt, Nirmal and Nath. The government organizes a big feast on this occasion. In nearby Bhaktapur and Prahladpur too there are beautiful temples.

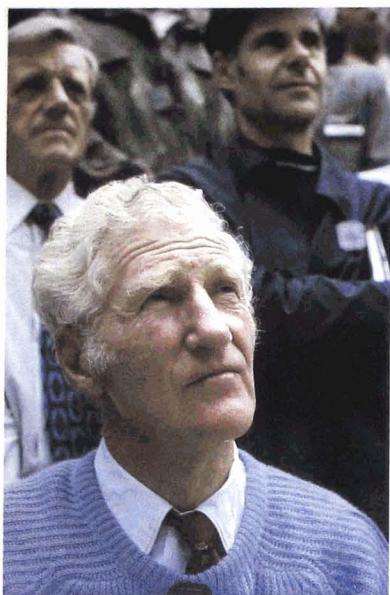
Nepal Himalaya are extremely beautiful and have been saved from pollution to a great extent. There are many wild animals here, although their number has come down due to illegal hunting. In the Terai area, wild elephants, rhinoceros and tigers are found, but they have survived only in sanctuaries. In the valleys of middle Himalaya, the villagers are socio-economically backward. Illiteracy, poverty, disease, superstition, and suppression of women's rights are prevalent. On one hand a virgin is worshipped as a goddess, on the other hand women are debased in every way. A large number of men and women leave the country to look for jobs because of poverty.

The journey to Kailash-Mansarovar is much easier from Nepal. A road has been constructed between Kathmandu and Tibet. There are few restrictions from

BELOW LEFT: Edmund Hillary, who along with Tenzing Norgay reached the virgin peak of mount Everest in 1953.

RIGHT: Tenzing Norgay at International Mountaineering Meet.





Lord Hunt, leader of the first successful expedition to mount Everest.

the Chinese side. For sadhus looking for a cheaper journey the way through Nepal is the best alternative. From Pokhra on the pilgrimage route a great view of the Himalaya is available. There is a famous pilgrimage centre here called Muktinath which has a large pond. Natural black stones, used for making idols, are found here. In Neelkanth, close to Kathmandu, there is a large idol of Lord Vishnu resting on his 'bed' of Sheshnag, the legendary snake.

Kanchenjunga

To the east of Nepal Himalaya lie Bhutan and the Indian states of Sikkim and West Bengal. Sikkim is especially beautiful. Here one can easily reach the upper Himalaya. The lower Himalaya are less cold and enjoy more rain. That is why there is a rich variety of vegetation here. It can truly be called a museum of Nature. Apart from thick forests Sikkim also has many natural lakes. There is heavy snowfall in higher reaches in winters. There are many Buddhist monasteries in Sikkim, and a fewer number of Hindu temples.

The lower hills of West Bengal are rich with sweet smelling tea gardens. Darjeeling is a popular hill resort in these hills. Tiger hill, close to Darjeeling, is about 6,000 ft in height. From here one can get a clear view of the Kanchenjunga peak (20,169 ft) and other adjoining peaks. From nearby Sandakpur this view is even clearer. The famous striped Bengal tiger is found in this area also.



Golden Buddha at Japanese Peace Pagoda in Darjeeling.



Rumtek Monastery, 24 km from Gangtok in Sikkim.



Buddhist prayer flags are an integral feature of the Sikkim landscape.

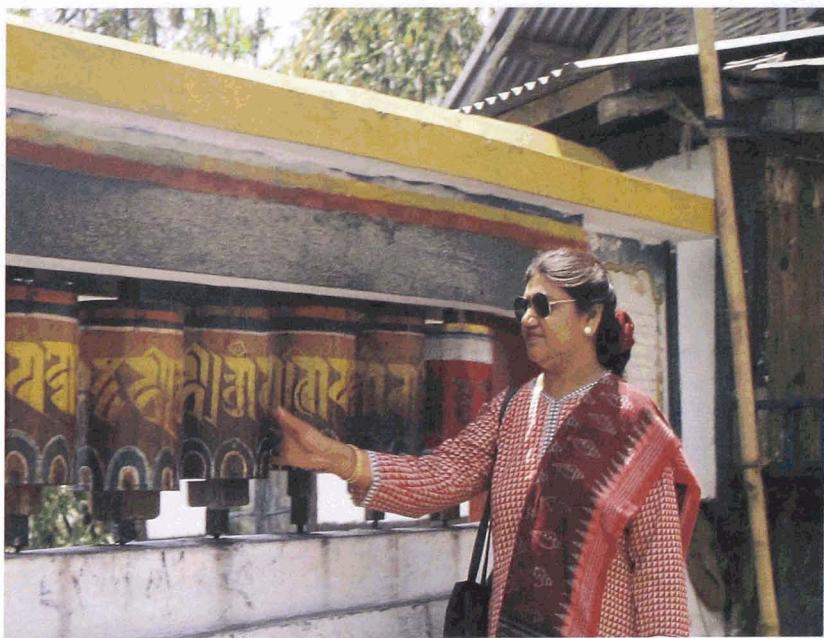


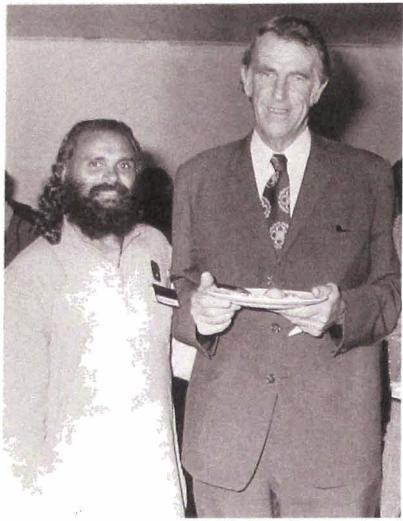
Carving on stone outside Pemayangtse, one of the oldest 'living' monasteries.

Himalaya Mountaineering Institute

The author took formal basic training from the Himalaya Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling in 1963. Everest hero Tenzing Norgay was his instructor. Fellow students were greatly amused on seeing a sadhu in saffron clothes undergoing mountaineering training. Tenzing, as a field director, took the trainees to Rohtang glacier (not to be confused with Rohtang Pass in Himachal Pradesh). The author took many photographs of Tenzing during the training. When Tenzing found that the author was adept at climbing and also at taking pictures, he asked, "Swamiji, you are already experienced in climbing mountains and snowy areas, then why did you spend so much money to take training in this Institute?" The author replied, "I have come to learn new techniques from an internationally famous mountaineer like you and to become your disciple." Tenzing was pleased at this answer and allowed him to take photographs during the training. The fellow trainees, who included officers from the army and young men and women from rich families were envious of the author because of the special attention given to him by Tenzing. However, later they also became friends. The trainees got an opportunity to climb the Kabru and Prey peaks of Sikkim. At the end of the course, the certificates were distributed by Everest hero Captain Kohli.

Spinning goodluck: tourists always have a desire to spin these prayer drums as they are believed to be harbingers of good fortune.





The author with Edmund Hillary at International Mountaineering Meet.

International Mountaineering Meet

The author was a delegate to the First International Mountaineering Meet at Darjeeling in 1972. Tenzing greeted him on this occasion with folded hands. The author also had the good fortune of meeting and photographing members of the first expedition to Everest — Edmund Hillary and Lord Hunt. At this international gathering, the author presented a slide show of Himalaya which was highly appreciated. From the stage it was announced that Swami Sundaranand was not merely a sadhu but a photographer of great accomplishments. The announcement was greeted with long applause. Many foreign mountaineers became good friends and popularized him abroad. Some of them keep visiting him in his Tapovan cottage at Gangotri. Mountaineering teams going to climb peaks in Garhwal Himalaya have made it a point to consult him in his cottage. Even Sir Edmund Hillary, during his expedition 'Ocean to Himalaya' graciously visited his cottage. He was greatly impressed on seeing the author's mediation hut. He was beside himself with joy on receiving the book 'Wandering in the Himalaya' written by the author's Gurudev. This sequence of high-profile events made the author famous amongst foreign mountaineers. Foreign tourism writers began including his photographs in their books in languages like German, Japanese, Spanish and of course English.

After the slide show in the mountaineering institute, there was great demand for it from other organisations. Hence slide shows were held in Darjeeling's Rotary club, tea gardens and the local colleges. These shows formed a part of the thousands of slide shows given by the author in various towns and cities all over India.

Assam Himalaya

Most of the lower ranges of eastern Himalaya fall in Assam. In the higher regions there is light snowfall in winters. The lower regions have thick forests. There are no ice-capped peaks here. The rain-fall is heavy in the foothills and the lower hills. There are forests of banana, cane and bamboo. Pine and Fir are found in the higher areas. Among animals are elephants, rhinoceros and wild buffaloes. Several rivers coming down from these mountains ultimately merge in the mighty Brahmaputra. The local name for this huge river is Lohit. Of all the rivers of India, Brahmaputra carries the maximum water and is also the swiftest. The origin of the Brahmaputra is in the Kailash-Mansarovar area. There are many big and old Buddhist monasteries in Arunachal Pradesh, formerly a part of larger Assam, where a large number of monks live. There are many tribal groups in Assam. Many of the valleys are inaccessible as there is not even a footpath to some of them. Rich vegetation includes more than 1,000 varieties of orchids. The Himalayan area of Assam is now called Arunachal Pradesh. Its natural beauty is incomparable. However, due to lack of travel facilities, only experienced trekkers visit these areas.

Western Himalaya

In the western Himalaya lie the states of Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir. In the north the western Himalaya extend upto Tibet. There are snow-covered mountain ranges in both states. Several lakes, and rivers make the valleys rich in natural beauty. The peaks in this area are not as high as the peaks in Garhwal Himalaya, but they are extremely beautiful. On the India-China border in Jammu and Kashmir there are several passes which were used for trade with

Navam Gombu who climbed mount Everest twice.



Tibet. These passes close down in winters due to heavy snowfall. Heavy snowfall occurs in Himachal and Ladakh and in the northern parts of Kashmir. In some years the temperature goes down to minus 50°C in Drass area of Jammu-Kashmir and in Spiti valley in Himachal Pradesh. At many places there are hot water springs. Very few people live in these extremely cold regions.

In Himachal Pradesh, the valleys of Lahaul, Spiti, Kullu and Kinnaur provide special attraction for those intending to travel on foot.

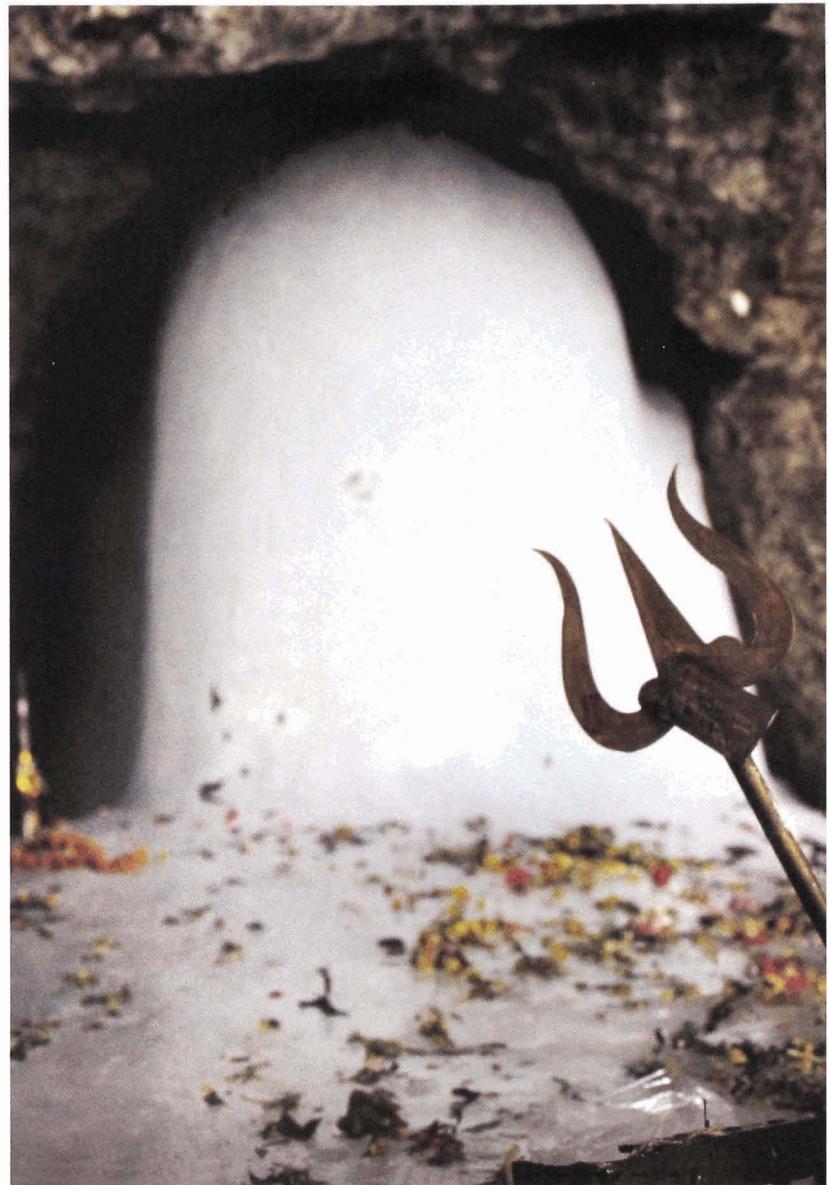
In the lower reaches of Kangra in Himachal Pradesh there is a place called Jwalamukhi. Inflammable Gas emerging from the bowels of the earth keeps burning and is worshipped as an eternal flame. There are ancient temples of Nainadevi, Chintapurni and Vaishnodevi which are open for pilgrimage all the year round. There are Buddhist monasteries in both states which are visited by tourists in large numbers. A new Buddhist monastery has been established in dharamshala where Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibet, has taken up residence.

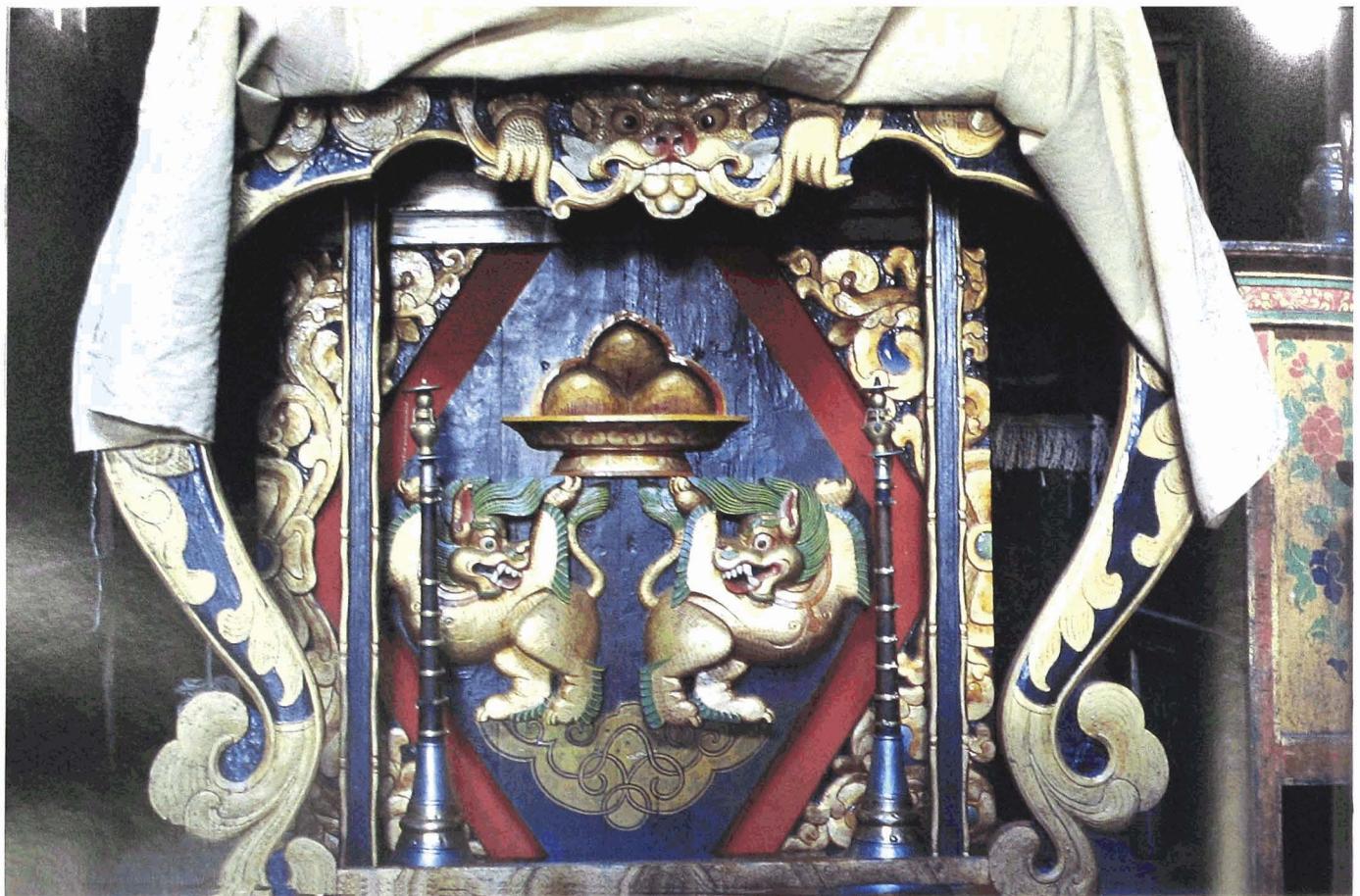
Kashmir Valley

Kashmir valley is the biggest valley of the Himalaya and it is also the most level. It is surrounded by high, forested mountains. The main river of the valley is Jhelum, which originates from a spring in Berinag in the valley below Banihal Pass. There are large lakes in the valley like Nagin, Dal and Wular. In Srinagar, the state capital, there are the famous gardens of Mughal times — Shalimar, Nishat, and Chashmeshahi. The famous Dal and Nagin lakes with their attractive and luxurious houseboats form the 'heart' of Srinagar. No wonder Kashmir valley is known as the most beautiful place on earth, or simply heaven on earth. Apart from the large variety of fruits grown here, the valley is famous for cultivation of saffron. Boats are used in the lakes and the river Jhelum for transportation.

There are many ancient temples and pilgrimage centres in Jammu and Kashmir, the most

*Only one of its kind in the world:
naturally formed Shivalinga of snow
at the holy cave of Amarnath
in Jammu & Kashmir.
Several thousand pilgrims undertake the
hazardous journey every year –
not everyone makes it.*





An intricate work of Buddhist art in a gompa (Buddhist monastery) of Ladakh, kept covered most of the time.



A man from Ladakh wearing distinctive headgear.

prominent being the 'holiest of holy' Amarnath cave. Here a natural Shivalinga of ice gets formed on its own.

For Amarnath cave the journey is undertaken through Pahalgam or through the Sonmarg-Baltal route. The Baltal route is shorter but tougher. There is danger of landslides on both these routes. Sometimes snowstorms also occur. The traditional Amarnath pilgrimage begins with the holy mace under the leadership of Dashnami ascetics on the Raksha Bandhan day occurring on Shravani Purnima. In the holy cave pilgrims savour the darshan of the ice Lingam and perform worship.

The bugyal of Gulmarg in Kashmir valley is a big tourist attraction. It is known for winter games when it is covered with snow. A little above is a very pretty slope called Khilanmarg.

Many pilgrims visit the Sharda Peeth (connected with Adi Shankaracharya), the Shivalaya in Ksheer Bhawani and ruins of old temples in Martand. At the Shivalaya of Ksheer Bhawani the water in

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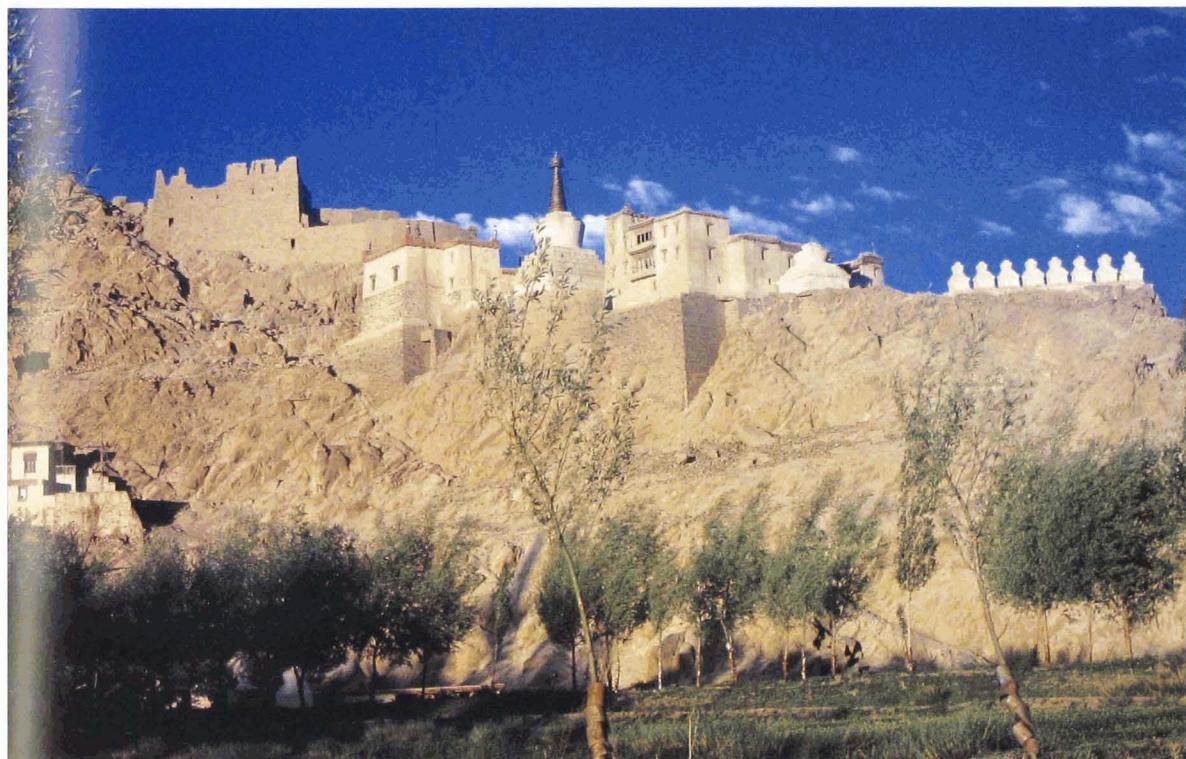
TOP: A woman from Ladakh in traditional attire.

BOTTOM: A typical gompa in Ladakh.

the spring-fed pond is milky. A very beautiful crystal Shivlinga is established here. There is the famous Hazratbal mosque in Srinagar and on top of the Shankaracharya Hill is Sharda Peeth, an ancient institute for education. In olden days Kashmir used to be a big centre of scholars. Sharda Peeth has four doors. The south door was kept closed till Shankaracharya defeated the local scholars in the debate on scriptures and thus won the right to have it opened. Only strict Brahmacharis were allowed to sit in the Peeth, and the Shankaracharya was thus allowed in. In Jammu region, the Raghunathji temple in Jammu city is very famous. Pilgrims visit Vaishnodevi and several temples connected with Mother goddess but other places are frequented only by fun seeking tourists.

Ladakh

Ladakh is the driest region of the Himalaya. It is part of Jammu and Kashmir state, and its main town, Leh (13,000 ft), has now been developed into a large tourist centre. There is a big monastery in this Buddhist area. Although Ladakh is a very cold place, snowfall occurs only in the higher reaches. Rainfall is scanty and hence it is called a cold desert. But now farming is done, orchards can be seen and even forests are being developed. Some of the mountains and valleys extend upto 18,000 ft height. There are several hot water springs also here.





The sight of sunrise and sunset is unique in Ladakh. The Sindhu or Indus river flows through the Leh valley. It originates near the Mansarovar lake. There are several passes in northern Ladakh from where one could reach Tibet. These are old trade routes which have been closed now. There are beautiful and artistic idols of Buddha and his close disciples in the numerous monasteries of Ladakh. The monasteries, usually established on top of high hills, are world-famous for their wall paintings. Ladakh is an ideal place for seclusion and meditation. Tourists arrive here in large numbers to visit the monasteries.

Among animals, yaks – Sura Gaya in Indian legend, sheep and horses are found here. It was a very hard life for people in the olden days. In the high, inaccessible valleys life is still very difficult, but the people are healthy, cheerful and very friendly.

The western-most part of Himalaya lies in Pakistan. It is a very cold and dry area. K2, the second highest peak in the Himalaya, is in the Karakoram Range. This part of the Himalaya borders both Afghanistan and Tibet. In the Pakistan-occupied areas of northern Kashmir lie the areas of Gilgit, Hunja and Baltistan, which are very scenic and populated by tribals and nomads.

Kullu Valley

The Beas river flows through Kullu valley of Himachal Pradesh. It originates from Vyas Kund, a little below the Rohtang Pass. This pass, lying between Kullu valley and Lahaul-Spiti valleys, remains blocked by snow in winter. Strong icy winds blow here in the afternoons. Even in summers, travellers get caught in snowstorms, rain or hail. That is why it is safer to cross this pass in the mornings alone. After the sun rises, the hard snow starts melting and the path becomes slippery.

Kullu valley is famous for its orchards and forests. Beyond the mountains on its two sides lie many other valleys and bugyals. Parvati river joins the Beas a little below Kullu town. There is a very big hot water spring in the Parvati river valley. The place is called Manikaran, which is a pilgrimage centre for both Hindus and Sikhs. In the Deodar forests of this valley there are many trees which are hundreds of years old. There are several lakes in Himachal Pradesh of which the most prominent is Chandra Taal. There are several small hot water springs in the valley where people go and enjoy having a rejuvenating bath. Some hot water springs are famous for curing skin diseases.

A road has been built through the Rohtang pass and during summer it is possible to cross it by motor vehicles. This road leads to Leh in Ladakh (northern region of Jammu & Kashmir state.) There is a large

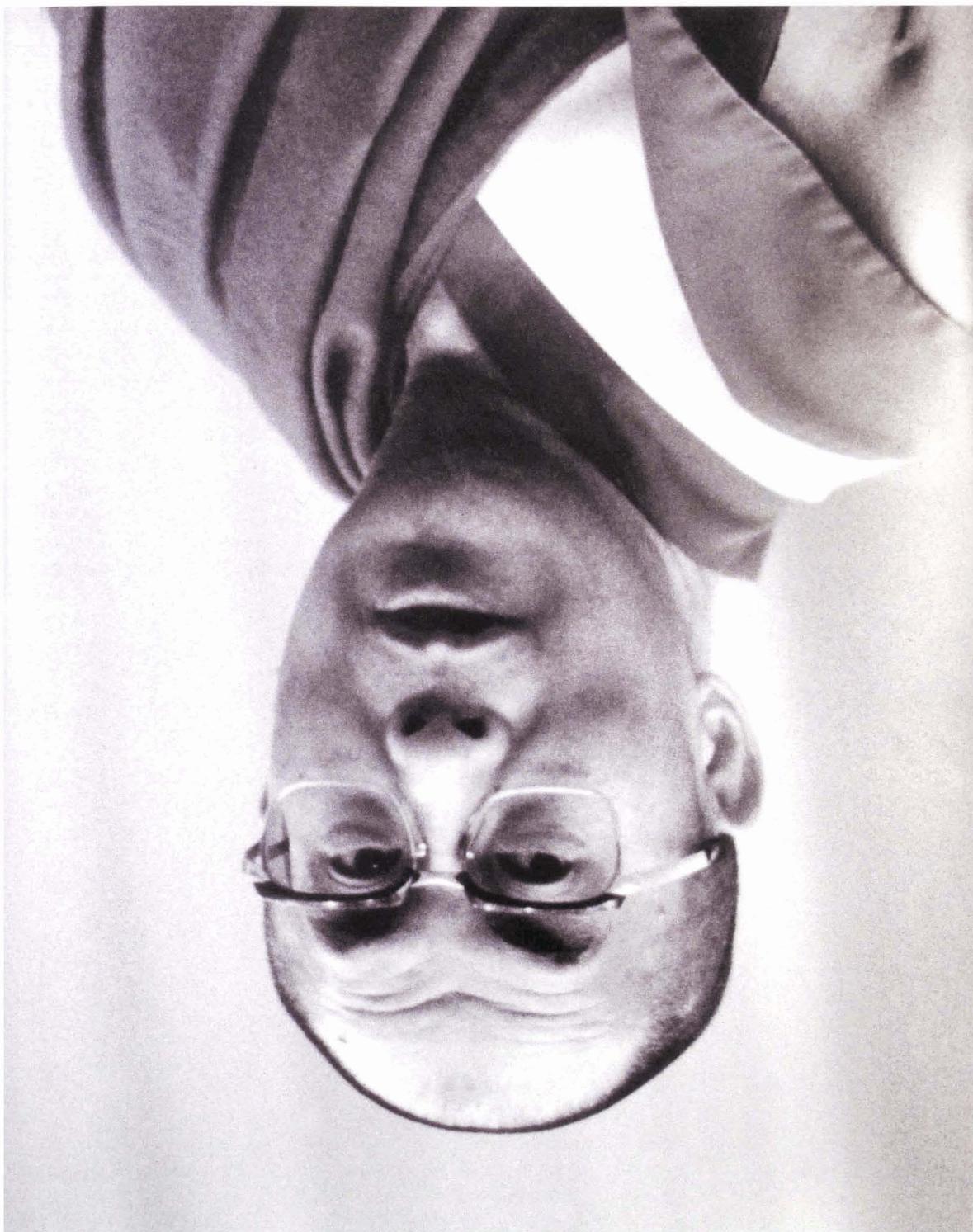
A golden idol of Lord Buddha in a Ladakhi gompa, wearing a most unusual crown, with deities and a wealth of motifs decorating each petal of the crown.

Lord Buddha is believed to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu by Hindus.

The three finalists: who is the most beautiful of them all? Brahmakamals, also called Sthal Kamals.



This current seat is at Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh.
Tibet's spiritual leader, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace (1989).





Archa leaves:
flames of fire in the forest.

marble idol of Lord Buddha in the Kocharnath temple of Lahaul valley. It is a pilgrimage centre for both Buddhists and Hindus. There is a big Buddhist monastery in Kelong, the main town of the valley. Kelong is also the administrative centre of Lahaul-Spiti valleys, and is not very far from the confluence of Chandra and Bhaga rivers. After the confluence the river is known as Chandrabhaga or Chenab. There is an ancient monastery in Spiti also. Potatoes, peas and hops are cultivated in a small way in the Chandrabhaga valley. There are no big trees here apart from willow.

Rampur-Bushahr is a border village in east Himachal Pradesh. Gaddi shepherds use this road to travel to and from Garhwal. The road remains closed in winter due to excessive cold and snow. The Gaddi nomads call themselves sons of the Himalaya. They tie a rope made from goat hair around their waist. The rope comes handy for climbing and for other purposes. They are healthy and good looking people who respect and look after sadhus and ascetics they meet on the way.

Manali is a tourist spot in Kullu valley. It has beautiful forests and apple orchards. Fifty years ago it was merely a village but now it is a big town. There is a mountaineering institute near Manali. Kullu town is an administrative centre and its Dussehra is world-famous.

In Himachal Pradesh the highway upto Leh in Ladakh goes through Manali, Rohtang pass and Kelong. But it gets closed in winter. It is being developed as an alternative to the highway that goes through the Kashmir valley and Zozila Pass. On this route lies Kargil which is very close to Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. The high Zozila pass on this highway also receives very heavy snowfall in the winters — at times 30-40 ft. Sometimes the army convoys get stuck in this snow. Generally the highway remains closed due to snow, hence the need for an alternate highway. ☺

Mother and child: A drift-wood masterpiece fashioned by nature.



Environmental Degradation

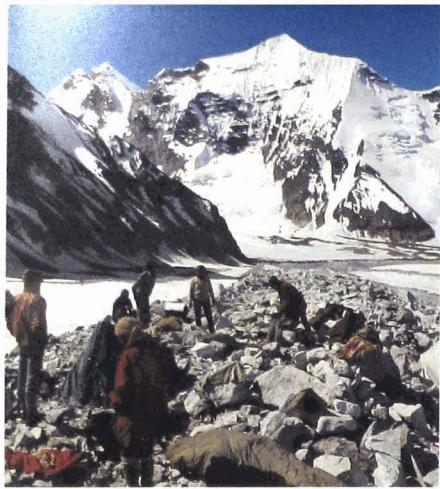
Environmental degradation in the Himalaya is a major cause for concern. There is ample evidence of damage to the special environment of the Himalayan heights. The glaciers now melt faster. Many small peaks which remained snow-covered 50 years ago, have now become bare. In the last 50 years or so the Himalaya have been rapidly denuded of forests. Rare plants, herbs and many varieties of trees have disappeared. The river waters are getting polluted right at the source. Temperatures are rising in the higher regions leading to reduced rain and snowfall. The commercial exploitation of Himalaya has risen in proportion to the rise of population and expansion of tourism. Villages comprising two or three houses have grown into big villages, and big villages have become towns. Hundreds of new towns have come up. Once the population of areas like Rishikesh and Uttarkashi could be counted in hundreds. These have now become big towns boasting populations of several lakhs. Even Gangotri, which once had only a few huts of sadhus, now supports a large population. Most of them are traders and commercial minded monastic heads whose main function is to fleece pilgrims and tourists. The peace and piety of the Himalaya has been violated.

Pressure of Population

Before the population explosion, the permanent residents in the Himalaya were very few. The means of communication — the roads, were not there. There was very little exploitation of the natural wealth of the Himalaya. Whatever little the people took from Nature was replenished during nature's six *ritus* (seasons). There was a natural balance between the flora and fauna in the forests of Himalaya and the lower Himalayan valleys. The environment was not harmed. In normal years, snowfall of 4 to 6 ft in a day used to occur at places of 10,000 to 12,000 ft height. There was no dearth of water in the forests and on the slopes of mountains. There were innumerable streams and waterfalls at small distances. Water flowed the whole year round from springs. The forests were lush green.



Blocks of ice falling in a lake in Chaturangi glacier – a possible consequence of global warming.



Even the face of glaciers is increasingly being scarred by debris. Mountaineers inspecting a disfigurement of Chaturangi Glacier.

Arranging potable water from the Ganga to this hamlet perched above it is a challenge for civil engineers.

There used to be regular snowfall in lower areas like Shimla, Mussoorie, Nainital, Almora, Ranikhet etc. In areas above 12,000 ft and in higher valleys there was endless snow. Entire buggals and forests below them got totally covered with snow. When this snow melted in summers, the rivers swelled with water, the forests got irrigated and new plants and vegetation took root. The mountains became fertile and every inch was saturated with water. Abundant water in the rivers brought prosperity to north and northeast India. The terraced farming on sunny mountain slopes was totally dependent on nature and the number of domestic animals was not large either. Human activities did not cause any harmful effect on the environment. It was the practice to gather only dry grass and leaves for feeding cattle. For construction of houses, only dried trees were cut.

Travel was also limited due to the difficulty of access. The small number of pilgrims who came were all filled with devotion. They did not cause any kind of pollution. It was forbidden to throw waste or wash clothes in the Ganga water, or to pollute it in any other manner. Trees were worshipped. To be blessed with a child, the childless couples used to perform marriage of trees. That kind of devotion and respect for the Himalaya and its environment is no longer in evidence.

Tourism symbolizes fun and pleasure-seeking. On the other hand, a 'pilgrimage' is a journey on which there is a voluntary acceptance of discomfort with discipline and fortitude, with the ultimate aim of achieving religious merit and to expiate sins. The Indian tradition has been of pilgrimage and that is why temples were built on mountains, river banks, lakesides and seashores. Pilgrims remained in harmony with Nature and did not cause any damage to the





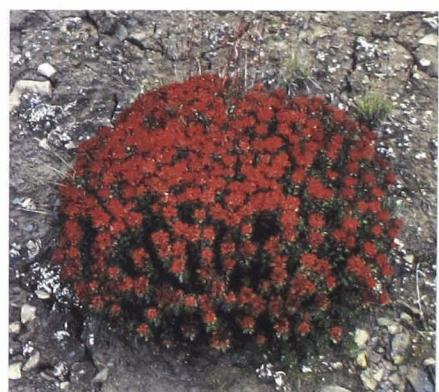
Local people in Bhrgu valley with plucked flowers of Brahmakamal, Fen Kamal and Sirtaj. Commercial and over-exploitation of these flowers has brought them to the verge of extinction.

environment. For the promotion of tourism, all kinds of facilities for comfort, fun and pleasure are provided by exploiting nature which causes irreparable damage to the environment. At the time of developing hill areas for tourism, the authorities should give first priority to protecting the environment.

The population in the Himalaya has grown as rapidly as in the plains. Also because of the rush of visitors from plains, human activities have risen manifold as compared to what they were 50 years back. These activities are leading to many kinds of geographical changes which have an adverse impact. For building roads and for habitation, it is not only the forests which are being cut, even slopes of mountains and plains are being dug up or cut up. The Himalaya have reached the end of their capacity to sustain population; and still people keep coming from the plains and from neighbouring Nepal. The exodus from the hills for reasons of poverty and unemployment is not as large as the influx due to increase in commercial activities. Traders and industrialists with their army of servants and labour force are coming and settling down permanently in the Himalayan region. Besides refugees from Tibet settling down in many towns of Himalaya, there has been a large influx of Bangladeshis too.

With the rise in population and trade, pollution has become a very serious issue in the entire Himalaya. Apart from tourists, tons of goods reach here by trucks. Waste, litter and other pollutants are piling up. Populations thrive close to rivers and lakes, and their sewage flows into them. The pollution in the Dal lake of Srinagar and Naini lake of Nainital has exceeded limits. Commercial activity and tourism have produced garbage which remains piled up at several

Rare flowers found at 17,000 ft above Kedar Taal in the Garhwal Himalaya. It may soon be found only in old photographs and books.





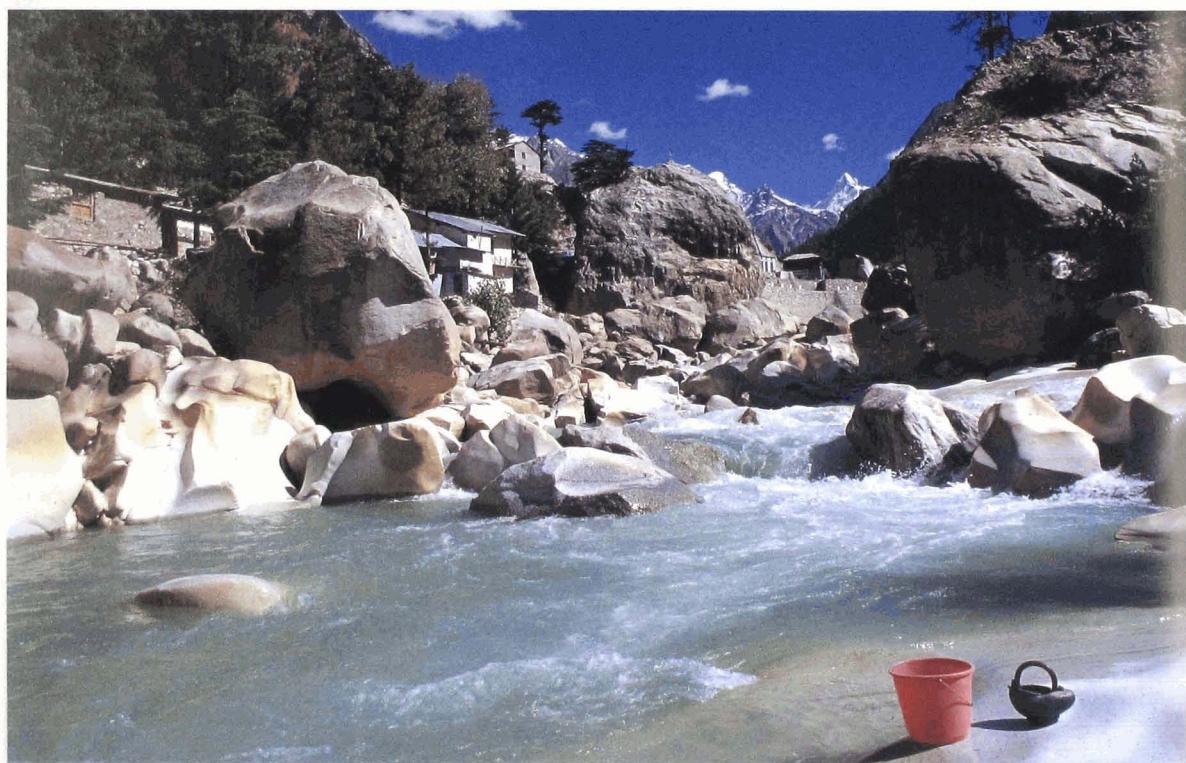
Bit by bit Gangotri glacier is melting and receding. Studies show that in the past 40 years Gangotri glacier has retreated up the valley by 1.25 kms. Coming generations may not believe current descriptions or statistics.

*For whom the bell tolls:
at the current rate of degradation, the purity of the Ganga's water may soon be defiled and ascetics and yogis may have to seek another haven. Bhagirath rock, Gangotri (pic 1985), when the impact of encroachments sent out alarm bells.*

places and does not even decompose. There are no good arrangements for sewage disposal in populated areas.

Violation of Gangotri

Gangotri has almost been devastated. It has now acquired the look of an ugly hill station. Multi-storey buildings of cement-concrete and temporary sheds of tin sheets have come up right on the banks of the Ganga. These so-called ashrams have acquired a commercial character. They are run like hotels. In the summers, during the pilgrimage season, more than 150 shops and dhabas come up in the area. The traffic has crossed limits. Several traffic jams are witnessed on the only road to Gangotri. Vehicles are parked on the roadside itself upto two kilometres. During the season, over 5-6 lakh tourists come here every year. The vehicles produce pollution with their fumes and noise. The Ganga water is also being polluted with sewage and garbage being emptied into it. Towers of garbage can be seen at several places. Although there is the Gangotri Development Authority (GDA) in existence, its work is slipshod and erratic. There has been blatant violation of building bylaws. Forests are set on fire every year for getting fuel and timber for buildings. Tree trunks are set on fire to dry up the trees so that they can be felled. The trees thus dried, and even the green ones, are felled in thousands in the winters with the help of migratory labour. Officials of the Forest Department and administration just shut their eyes to this depredation. Corruption is prevalent. Priests and traders also act in connivance with each other. Before our very eyes the country's invaluable natural and spiritual heritage is being destroyed. Trees as old as 500 to 1,000 years have not been spared. Those which



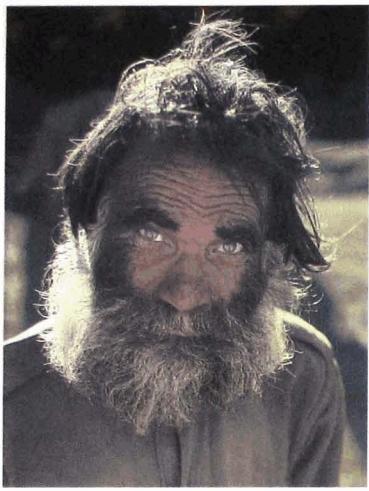
are left cannot be expected to live long. The Forest Department land around Gangotri is being appropriated for commercial use. It is done through subterfuge, with sadhus and priests first establishing cottages there. After a few years, they sell off the land or property at high prices.

Fake sadhus have encroached even over the historic Bhagirath rock and built ashrams on it, along with toilets. Earlier, pilgrims used to regard the Bhagirath rock and adjoining rocks with great reverence and used to meditate there. There were erosion marks on this rock of the ancient flow of the Ganga. Geologists can prove that at one time the tip of Gomukh glacier and the source of the Ganga was Gangotri itself. This is also evident from the vast expanse of the Ganga valley from Gangotri to Gomukh and its low gradient. The slope in the valley below the Bhagirath rocks is steep. But few people these days seem concerned about the past history and heritage of Gangotri and the Ganga. Their priorities are driven by commercial gain. Trees on both sides of the Ganga have been cut in Gangotri and in the cleared spaces multi-storey buildings and shops have come up. All this construction has been done on government land. The GDA officials first winked at the constructions, and now they don't take any action against the violators. Using threats, the *pandas* and *pujaris* go to the extent of saying, "Delhi is far away; Beijing is closer." The *pandas* have usurped authority over Gangotri as well as the religion.

Even today there is no committee to manage the affairs of the Gangotri temple. Under the cover of the temple, all kinds of improper activities are taking place. The supposed idol of Ganga being worshipped is said to be a broken idol of Durga. There should be a proper idol of Gangaji here which should be given due respect. The temple trust should also ensure cheap and comfortable shelter for poor pilgrims. The rules have been violated with impunity here. A public garden was encroached upon by a sadhu who later sold it off. Another so-called swami has encroached upon the public road and constructed a three-storey dharamshala there. Another trickster, who calls himself a yogi, has set up a four-storey building whose night soil falls into the Ganga. It is necessary to remove the camps of sadhus and the mushrooming tea and snack shops. Some sadhus have set up their tents or shacks even on the glacier above Gomukh.



In 1978, a landslide at Kanodia Ghat blocked the flow of Ganga for 14 hours, creating a temporary dam and a vast reservoir. When this dam burst, it caused havoc in villages lower down and killed several people.



How green were the valleys of my youth!

Flood waters flowing over the bridge at Kanodia Ghat in 1978.

Gangotri is the confluence of Ganga and Kedar Ganga. The latter flows from south to north to merge in the main river. There is religious significance of this confluence but it is marred by the commercialization and the pollution.

It is true that facilities for both the rich and poor travellers must be improved in Gangotri, but it should not be done at the cost of its natural surroundings. Why can't ashrams and hotels be built away from the Ganga? Visitors should preferably bring their own cooked food with them and not depend upon hotels and snack-joints.

The parking should be arranged a few kilometres below at Bhairon Ghati. Ashrams and cottages should not be built at places which are home to herbs and other valuable vegetation. Sadhus should be allotted small pieces of land for their huts and they should not be allowed to sell the allotted plots. Gangotri and other places in the Himalaya can be saved only by preventing destruction of the environment. The once pure waters of the Ganga too are no longer potable at places like Calcutta, Varanasi, Patna, Kanpur, Allahabad. Even at places near its origin, like Haridwar, Rishikesh, Uttarkashi and Gangotri, the Ganga water is not fit to drink. At all these places, piles of filth and garbage keep lying on the banks. Pilgrimage centres have now become centres of filth.

Destruction of the eco-system

The digging and cutting of Himalayan roots and herbs have increased lately. This has become a trade worth millions of rupees. The hirelings of smugglers uproot rare herbs in large quantities and make a collection of the roots and leaves. This work is done in July, August and September before their seeds ripen. Ordinarily, the seeds ripen in October and November. Thus, their regeneration is affected.



It is difficult to carry green and fresh roots and herbs. They are therefore spread out and dried on tin sheets placed on furnaces. The tin sheets work as hot plates. When a large quantity of roots and dried herbs are ready, these are filled in sacks and brought down from the high mountains and forests. This material is then supplied to the traders of Delhi and Amritsar. As a result of over-exploitation, the rare medicines and flowers of the Himalaya are on the verge of extinction. Greedy government officials too are hand-in-glove with this trade.

The smugglers have found a way to cut down even the ancient giant trees. They first peel the skin off the trunks of selected trees and set these on fire thus rendering them half-burnt. The trees then dry up. The next year the tree is declared dry or dead and is cut up into large planks and sold at high rates for construction work. Thus Deodar trees, 100 to 1,000 years old, have also fallen victim to the smuggler's axe. Birch trees are cut for building night shelters, cottages and for fuel. The green branches of Birch are taken away by shepherds to feed their flocks. Many repeatedly exploited trees die of their own. Trees like Kail, Deodar, Cheed and Rai-muraind are also under threat because they are commonly used for fuel.

This way the mountains and valleys of Himalaya are being systematically denuded. The delicate environmental balance of the Himalaya is in real danger. The environment has already been harmed a great deal. Till 50 years ago, there was a lot of rain and snowfall in Gangotri. Now for some years, snow and rain has been deficient.

The place has started getting hot in summers. The light snowfall in winters melts pretty early. The flow of water in the Ganga, Rudra Ganga and Kedar Ganga is much less today. Many lakes and ponds at high altitudes have either become smaller or dried up altogether.

Very old and large trees have survived in inaccessible areas alone. Here is a long list of places in the Himalaya from where forests have vanished: Badrinath (Badrivan), Uttarkashi, Yamuna valley, Har-ki-Doon, Tehri, Srinagar, Gangotri, Gomukh, Bhojvasa, Jangalavasa, Kedar valley, Rudra valley, Harsil, Dharali, Makwa, Sukhi, Jhala, Bhairon valley, Neelang valley, Bukki, Sungar, Dokrani, Mala-Awana, Kush Kalyan, Boodha Kedar, Joshimath, Nandadevi sanctuary, Hoti-Niti, Binsar, Neelam, Sundardoonga, Darjeeling, Kullu, Kaleshwar, Jwalamukhi and Rampur Bushahr in Himachal etc. The situation is similar in Kashmir and Jammu regions. Illegal felling is continuing wherever some forests are left and the natural balance of the Himalaya has been upset by this indiscriminate felling.



Lopping of trees continues to present an environmental threat. Deodar trees in Bhairon valley (ht 9,300 ft).



Ghost land where the ghosts of dead trees still roam. Bhojvasa after deforestation. The modus operandi: one year the Bhoj branches were cut for fuel and the next year, stealthily, the whole tree was felled.

Fen Kamal (ht 18,000 ft), an exotic bloom on the brink of extinction. Villagers keep it at home as protection from ghosts.

Burning of Forests

Every year forested areas are set on fire at hundreds of places to make way for cultivation. To fell trees or burn forests to clear land for farming is an old practice but has now become too widespread. Behind it is the vested interest of villagers, Forest Department workers and politicians. They all gain somehow or the other from the fires. They blame each other and shed crocodile tears for the Himalaya. The villagers are interested in new grass and in grabbing the forest land. The Forest Department employees want to make false claims about afforestation. The hunters manage to push forest animals in the direction opposite to the fire thus turning them into easy targets. For the last few years the fires in the hills have become so extensive that the entire Himalaya seems to be burning.

At night, the flames can be seen from miles away. Entire ranges of the Himalaya and the valleys get covered with smoke, which is a major health hazard. Ash starts raining from the skies. A devastating fire in 1999 continued to blaze from May to July. Its heat could be felt at far away places. Never before in the last 50 years has such a large area been burnt. There was hardly a valley or mountain which was spared. Large quantities of roots, seeds, medicinal plants and small animals like deer perished in this man-made fire. Even after the rains, the smoke continued





▲ The mountains are on fire. Every year thousands of trees are lost to blazes which are almost impossible to control. ▼

Often these are deliberate, started by the timber and land mafia.



for two weeks. Even the moon and stars were not visible at night. All this is happening in a pre-planned manner. This destruction took place before the very eyes of the administration. No efforts were made to extinguish the fires.

Such damage to the Himalayan environment can prove costly for the entire subcontinent. The government and the people should understand these dangers. Surprisingly, even the voluntary organizations working for environmental protection are silent on this issue. The geographical changes resulting from upsetting the natural balance in the Himalaya can result in land erosion, landslides, drought and sudden floods, all of which can prove disastrous even for the people living in the plains.

Water Sources Drying Up

As a result of continued environmental degradation, sources of water such as springs and lakes have dried up. Acute shortage of drinking and irrigation water occurs in the lower and middle Himalaya. Rain and snowfall is substantially reduced. The volume of water in the rivers has come down in the last 50 years. In summers the glaciers melt rapidly in the upper Himalaya causing floods in rivers. The water level in Himalayan lakes and ponds has also come down. Snow-fed lakes in places like Tapovan and Nandanvan have dried up. Vasuki lake, has now become a plain. The area of Kedar Taal has shrunk to half. In another 10-15 years it is certain to dry up. Lakes once full of water have dried up in other regions like Raktavarna, Rudragairu, Chaturangi, Kirti, Virahi, Kanodia, Purali, Kana and Gahan. The water level has come down in Nachiketa and Daundi Taals also.

It is not only the flowers that are under threat of extinction. With a fall in its level, the area of Kedar Taal has shrunk over the years.



Lakes of Badrinath and Kedar valleys are also drying up. In the language of the hills, *kana* means dried up lake. The seven lakes above Dharali and at the base of Shrikanth peak have all become *kana*. These geographical changes have been wrought by disturbances in the natural balance. And the changes have now become more rapid. To consider these changes as normal would be a big mistake. For the last many years the author has been warning about the ill effects of such changes, but alas, there has been no appropriate response from the slumbering administration.

Water Pollution

There were some significant traditions in Indian society to save water from pollution. People considered it sinful to dirty or pollute the waters of wells, ponds and rivers. Ganga water was specially procured for worship. River banks were not approached with shoes on. While crossing a wooden bridge over the Ganga, people used to take off their shoes and hold them in their hands. Gargling, brushing of teeth and washing of clothes in the Ganga were avoided. But now people are unashamed to openly cast sewage into the Ganga. It must have taken great effort on the part of ancient rishis to enforce habits of keeping water resources clean. We can never repay their debt. Now people of the western world are engaged in keeping their water bodies clean and are offering their technology to India. What a mockery it is? It is painful to see that we have forgotten the culture handed down to us by our rishis and have instead allowed destructive modern culture to become dominant.

Other Causes of Destruction

There are other causes as well of destruction in the Himalaya. A very big role in destruction is played by shepherds, cowherds and owners of horses and mules. With the increase in commercial activity, the population of domestic animals in the Himalaya has grown 20 times in the last 50 years. Fodder and grain for such a large number of animals is not available. The trees with leaves used for fodder



Thanks to the combined effects of degradation: range after range in the Himalaya may soon lose their glory. The face of Gangotri glacier is already crumbling.



A lake in Chaturangi glacier ready to fall under the 'dried up' category (pic 1985).

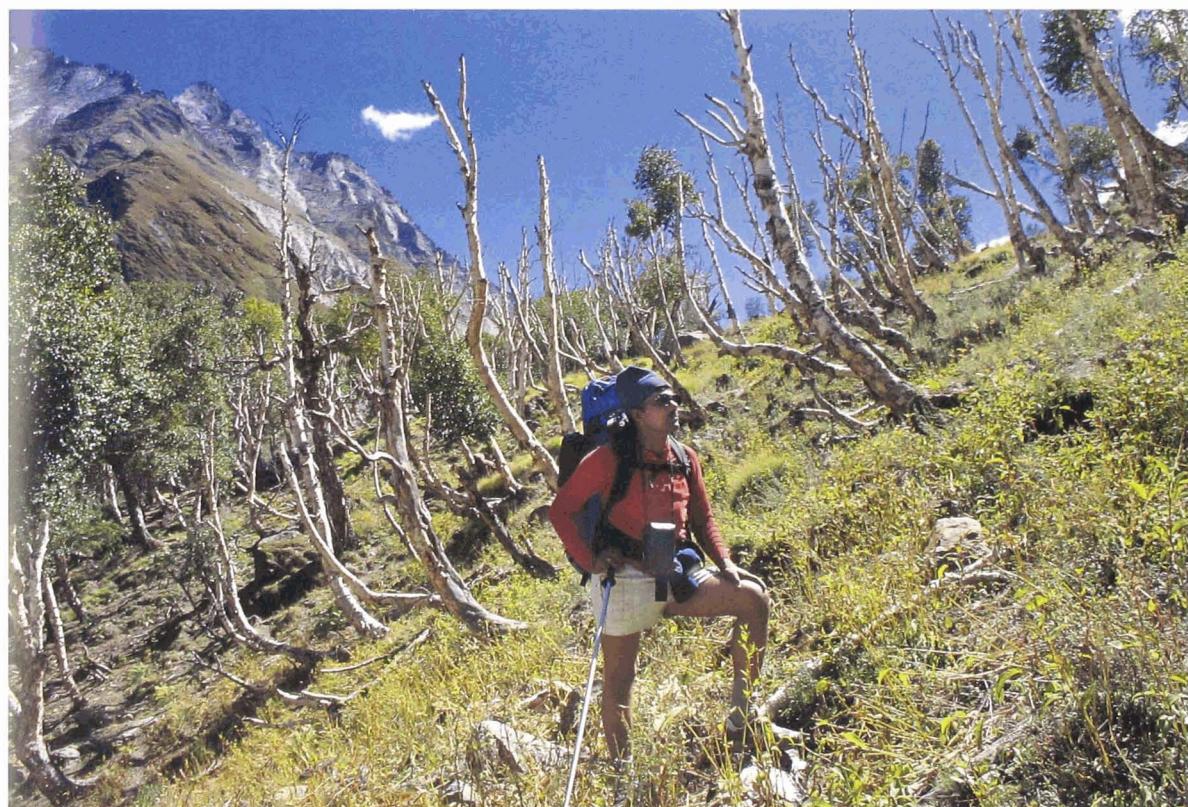
have vanished. There is not enough grass in the forests. Cowherds and shepherds take their animals for grazing to bugyals and valleys in higher regions. Entire bugyals have thus been denuded. Natural herbs and plants, vines and flowers have been grazed away. The cowherds even cut tree branches to feed their buffaloes. They cut paths in bugyals and valleys for the convenience of their animals. The slopes are being converted into pastures. During the rains these pits become marshy sloughs leading to land erosion, and ultimately landslides. The trampling by animals doesn't allow new plants to take root.

Fight to Save Forests

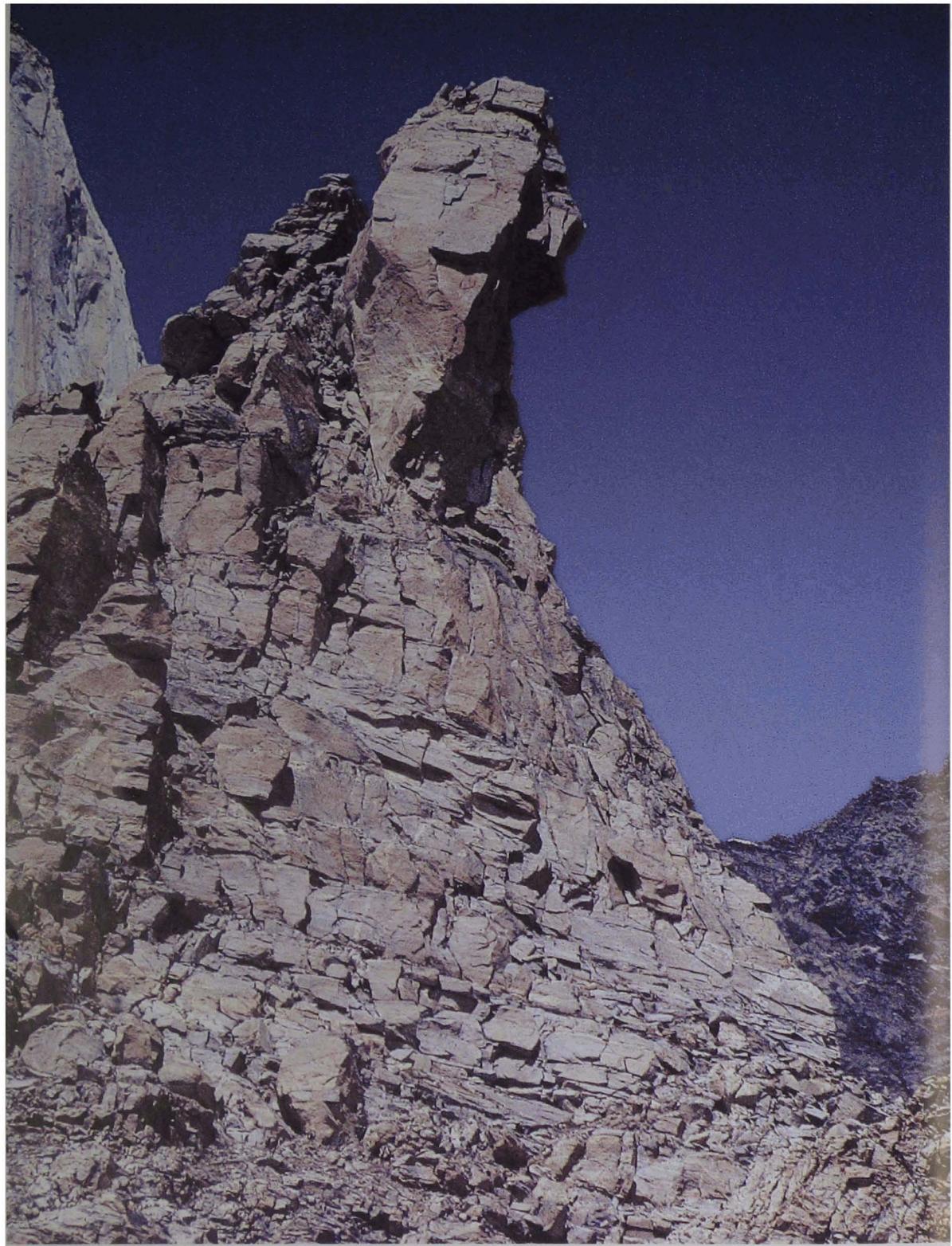
The author has fought against destruction and burning of forests.



Gum flowing from a giant tree in Cheedvasa where illegal felling of trees is quite rampant.



Forests of Bhoj trees at Bhoj Kharak on the way to Kedar Taal (pic 1985). At that time the question was where have all the leaves gone? Today, the question is where have all the trees gone?



Waiting for the final axe: a time-worn head awaits disintegration. Rocks of Bhagirath mountain keep falling due to the force of the wind and the weight of winter snow.

With his limited resources he has sought to educate people and impressed upon the authorities the dangers to the environment. As a result the administration has made many plans for planting trees but these have remained on files. Very little actual work has been done. The corrupt government workers and officials pocket the money granted for tree plantation. They are ignorant about the ecology of Himalaya. They do not understand that a plant cannot grow at a site inappropriate for it. These plants also die after sometime due to lack of care.

The author's agitation against destruction of forests was brought to the notice of the late Prime Minister Shri Rajiv Gandhi who got the Uttar Pradesh government to set up the Gangotri Development Authority. Its area of operation was the Ganga valley from Sukhi to Gomukh. But no work was done according to the schemes of the GDA and the pace of environmental damage increased instead of decreasing. On the behest of the author the Governor and the Chief Ministers of U.P. visited the area to see the state of affairs for themselves. It is ironical that after the formation of GDA, the commercialization of Gangotri has increased and so has the destruction of forests. The traders have now reached even Tapovan, which is above Gangotri and Gomukh. Under the cover of ashrams they have established hotels. To gain their selfish ends they mislead the pilgrims and tourists. They provide intoxicating drugs to foreigners and then loot them. Dhabas sprout at every conceivable place in summers and spread filth.

Afforestation Attempts

A three-decade long campaign to protect trees in the Himalaya could not awaken the administration. The Forest Department doesn't understand the nature of Himalayan trees and vegetation. The plants sown by them die very soon as the work is not done in an organized manner. A non-governmental effort to plant trees in Bhojvasa seems to be succeeding. A former lady mountaineer, Dr Harshavati Bisht, is a professor in one of the colleges of Uttarkashi. She has begun a project on her own and with her own resources. In Cheedvasa, she prepared a nursery of Bhoj, Cheed, Rai-muraind, Thelu (Juniper), Peepal (Venu) and Bangla plants. She arranged to get the fertilizer from 30 kms downstream. Of the 12,000 plants she got planted, only 100-200 have died. The rest of them have risen to a 3-4 ft height. Dr Bisht appointed two guards to look after the plants. She faced great difficulties in starting this project. Her efforts should be appreciated and young people eager to work for environmental protection should join such efforts. It seems that the work of preserving the precariously balanced environment of the Himalaya will be done by nature lovers, and not by the administration. ☺



Closely resembling a yak, it is locally known as Sura gaye, or Chamar gaye (cow).

Hair from its tail is used to fashion ceremonial whisks.

Its wool is valuable and milk is nourishing. Imbued with exceptional fighting abilities, a single Sura gaye can protect an entire herd of cows.

But are we protecting them?

Arjun awardee and Everester
Dr Harshavati Bisht, known for her
pioneering afforestation work at
Bhojvasa, which has been denuded by
unscrupulous people.



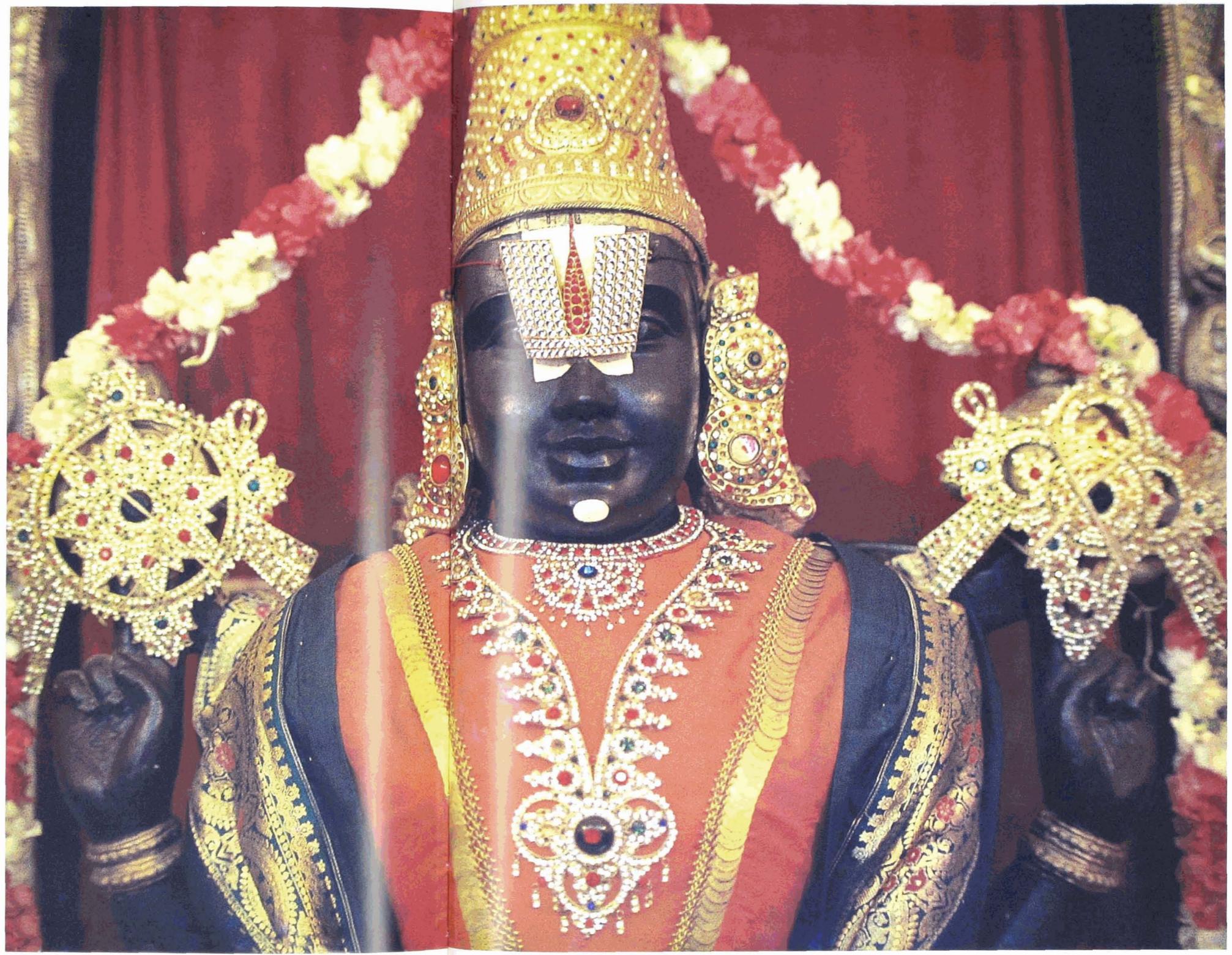
Unity in Diversity

I have clicked the many faces and moods of the Himalaya after arduous trekking in very hostile terrain. Travelling across the whole length and breadth of the rest of India was relatively easier. Wherever I have gone, in accordance with the pledge we sadhus take, to travel, observe and understand our country, my attempt has been to click and capture on camera a myriad different facets of people, places, landscapes, temples, idols and a host of other subjects.

While criss-crossing the country, I realized that there is a common thread, a common culture forming a continuity throughout. In fact Himalaya, the abode of Lord Shiva and the source of holy Ganga, are the connecting link for the whole country. For instance, it is the waters of the Ganga from Himalaya which are reverentially carried by devotees to pour over Shivalingas in virtually every nook and corner of the country, across thousands of kilometres, right upto Rameshwaram in the extreme south. This link is further strengthened since, as per the convention, only Brahmins from the south can become head priests of Badrinath and Kedarnath temples. In different parts of the country the idols used for worship may have different face cuts, their dresses and ornaments may have some variations, the actions and feelings depicted may have distinguishing features, but they all stem from the same mythological events and legendary stories.

This common bond stretching across the entire country is not confined to the modes of worship alone. Customs, festivals, cultural activities too are inherently the same from Kashmir valley in the north to the tip of Tamil Nadu in the south, from Assam in the east to Rajasthan in the west.

I have documented this remarkable homogeneity with my camera. I have a large number of transparencies taken in various parts of the country, out of which only a small selection has been reproduced on some of the preceding pages and in this section. The pictures relate to idols in different places, temples in different parts of the country, saints from different states, cultural ambassadors of different regions, common people in different moods — all depicting unity in diversity.



An idol of Tirupati Balaji in full regalia – not at Tirupati but at a Hyderabad temple.



Ornaments sculpted by a master craftsman. Goddess Parvati in Lingaraj temple at Bhubaneswar, Orissa.



Ouch! A heavily ornamented belle in pain as a thorn is extracted from her foot by an attendant.
Halebid Channakeshav in Karnataka.



The mythological Rahu-Ketu about to devour the Sun and the Moon.
Idol in the Navagraha (nine planets) temple alongside the Sun temple at Konark, Orissa.



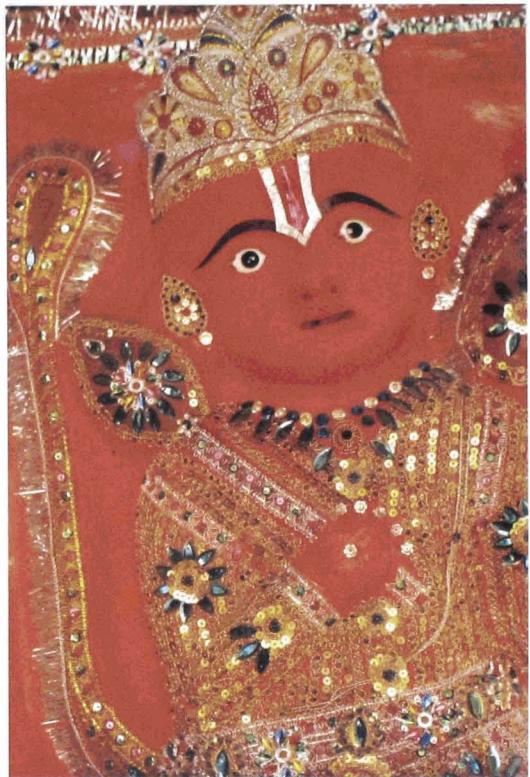
Damaged idol of Surya, the Sun God in Konark, Orissa.



Idol of Kartikeya Swami in Thiruchandur, Tamil Nadu.
He is variously known as Subramanya Swami, Shanmukham, Skandha Bhagwan.



Baal Krishna in the Hare Rama Hare Krishna temple at Hyderabad.



Baal Hanuman in a temple at Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh.



A sun-worshipper on the seventh storey of Konark Temple.



Yakshini in the courtyard of Halebid Shivalaya, Karnataka.



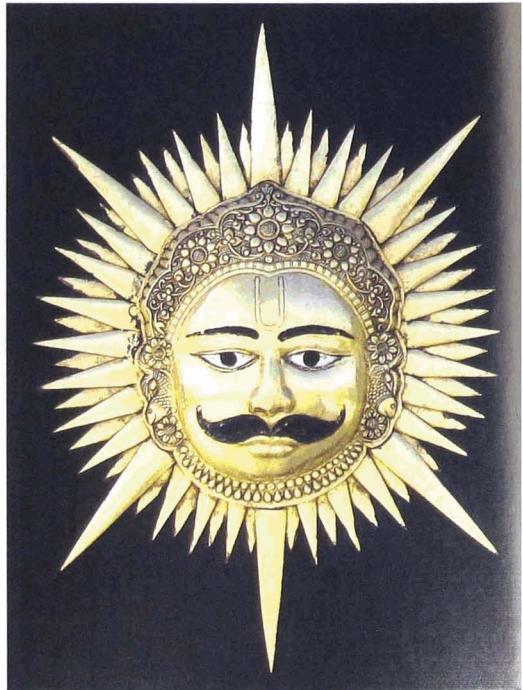
Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the great proponent of Krishna Bhakti and a source of inspiration for ISKCON movement.

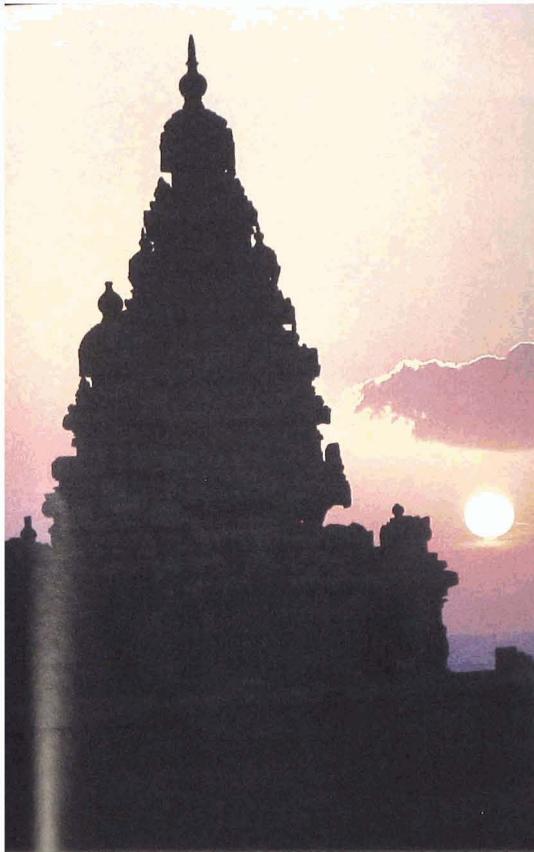
Saint Andaali, known as Meerabai of south India, in a temple at Shrirangapattanam. She was a devotee of Bharat Bhagwan, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu.



Stunningly beautiful and unique idol of goddess Radha in Govind Devji temple, Jaipur.

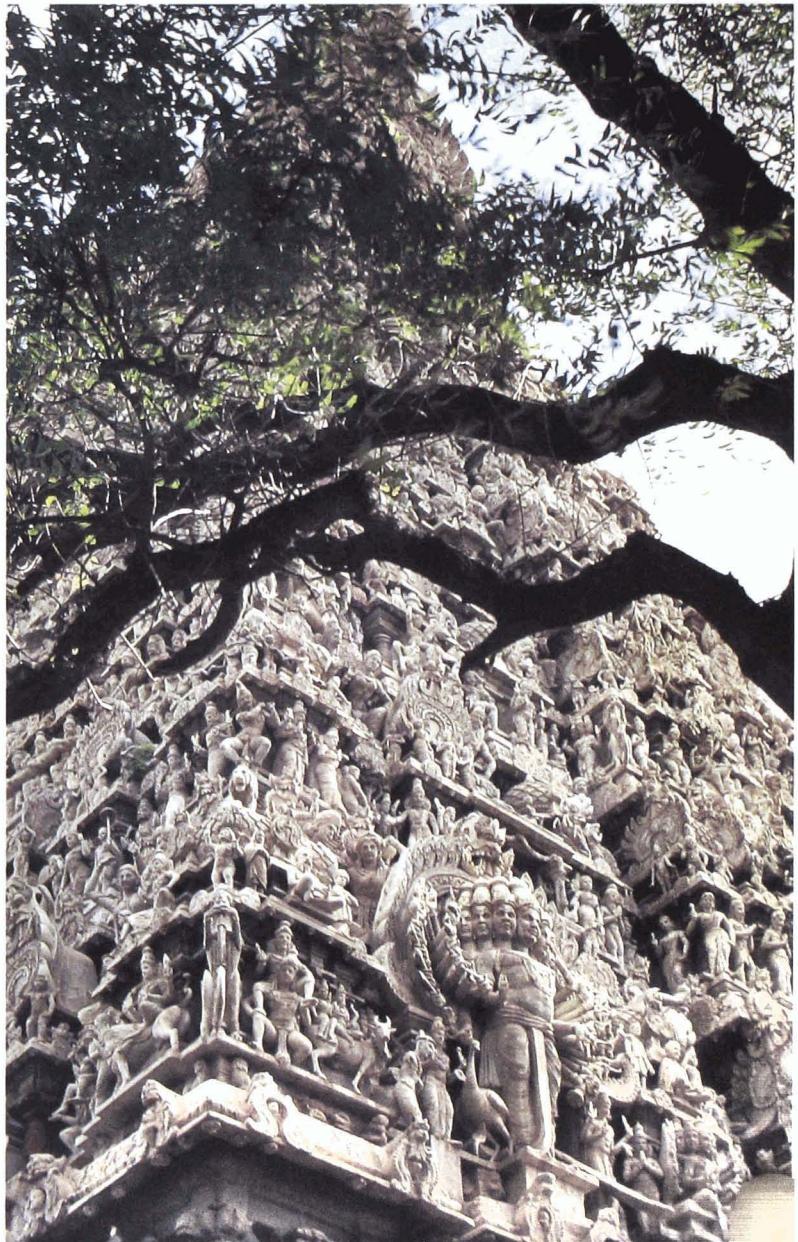
What is the truth? God made man in his own image... or man made God in his own image...?





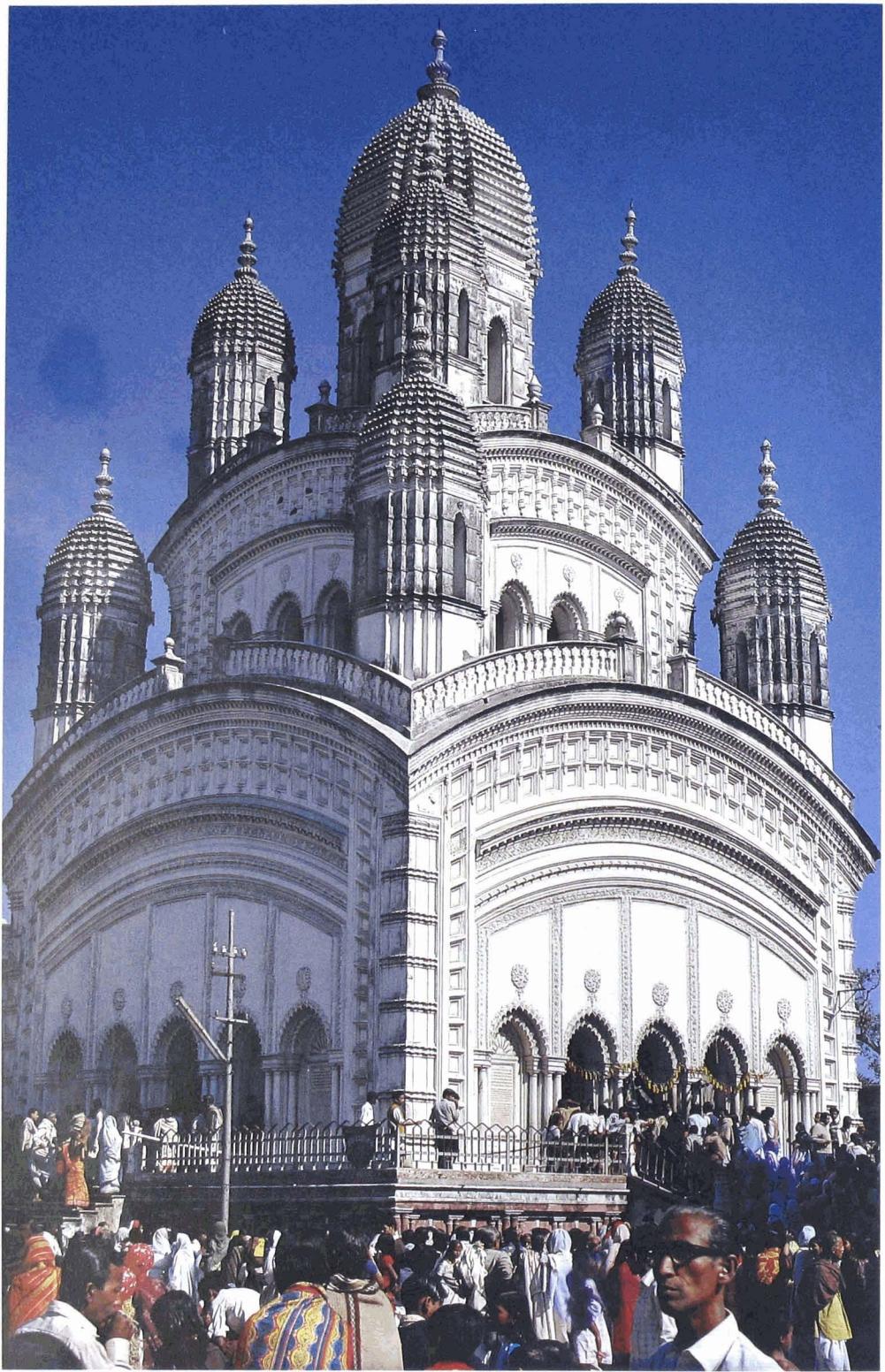
Mahabalipuram, also known as Mamallapuram, 60 kms from Chennai (Madras), was a sea port built by an emperor of the Pallava dynasty during the seventh century. It is well known for its monuments hewn out of solid rock. The Shore Temple, a little gem of a shrine, dedicated to lord Shiva, stands poised on the very shore, the waves beating against it. Being on the east coast sunrise from behind the temple is a treat to eyes.

Subramanya Swami temple at Thiruchandur on the sea coast in Tamil Nadu. The beautiful, intricately carved idols with their wealth of details are a common feature on the outer walls of temples in south India.



NEXT PAGE:

The famous Dakshineswar temple is situated on the bank of the sacred Ganga (Hooghly) in Calcutta. This temple of Kali, the Mother Goddess, is well-known for its association with the exalted spiritual master, Swami Ramakrishna Paramahansa, who often saw the Mother in embodied form and frequently talked to Her. His disciple, Swami Vivekananda, was instrumental in opening the floodgates of Indian Vedic knowledge to the West.

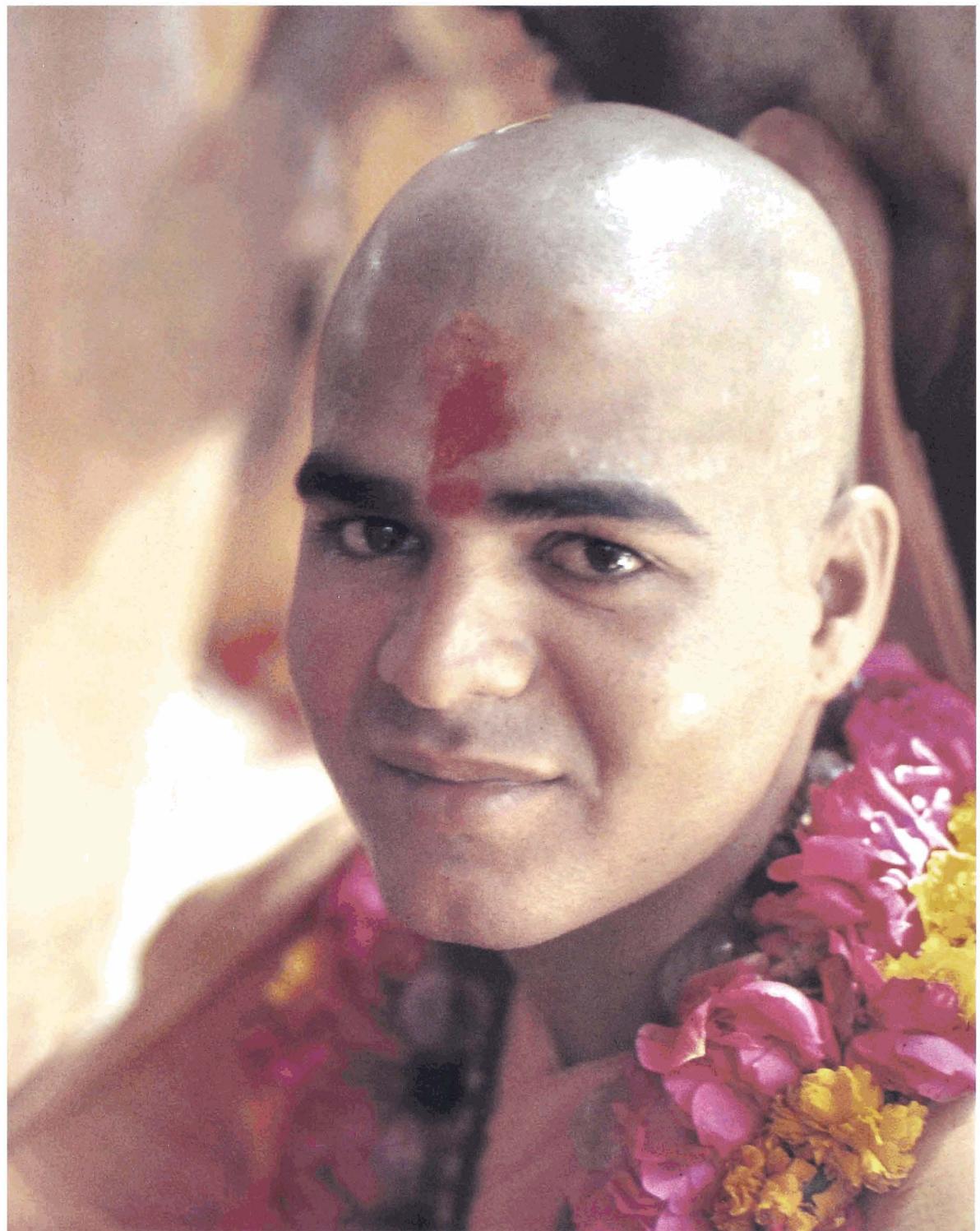




Late Anandmayee Maa, a spiritual giant from West Bengal.



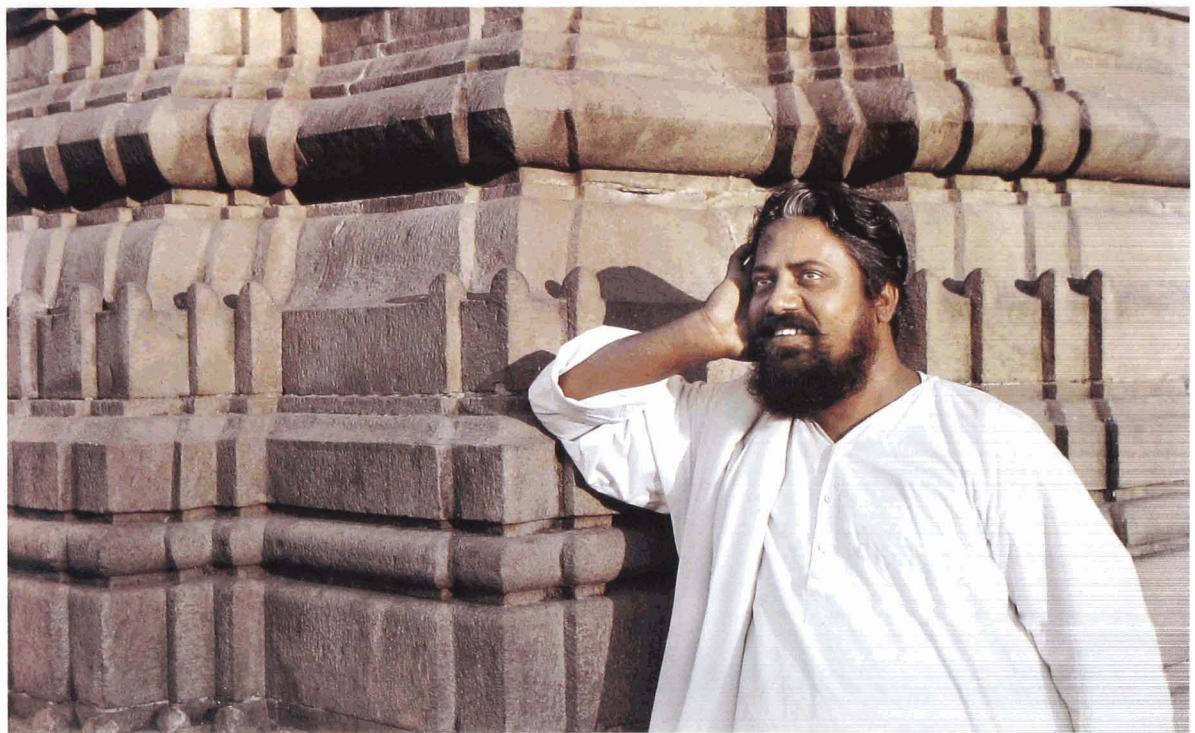
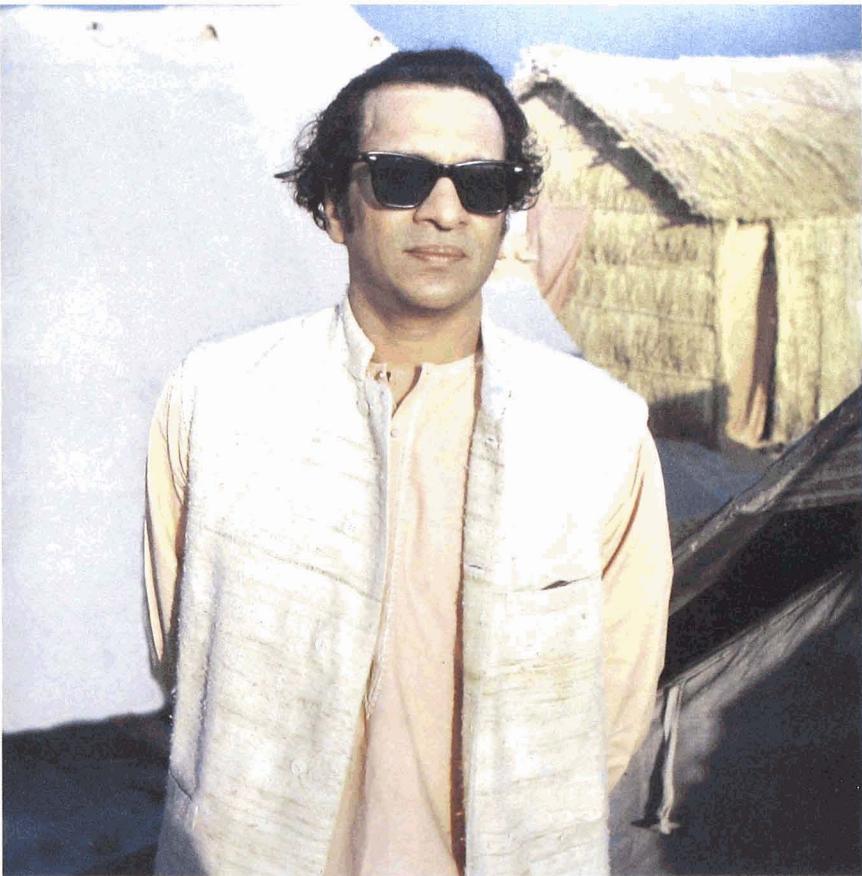
Mahant Avaidyanath of Naga sect.



Maha Mandaleshwara Vidyanand Giri of Kailash Math, (Juna Akhada), Nasik.



'Mamtamayee Maa' – Mumbai.





PREVIOUS PAGE:

TOP: Internationally acclaimed sitar maestro, Pandit Ravi Shankar during the Poorna Kumbha in Prayag, Allahabad (1965). He is a recipient of Bharat Ratna, the highest honour bestowed by the Government of India. He has a fan-following which cuts across generations and bridges Indian and Western musical traditions.

BOTTOM: Well known bhajan singer Hari Om Sharan at Gateway of India, Mumbai. He is one of the blessed few who stayed at Tapovan Kuti, Gangotri, for some time.

The glinting hair –
are they conveying something ...

The wistful eyes –
are they speaking something ...

The painted lips –
are they carrying some message ...

Only the camera knows.





A prize winning photograph from Hyderabad.

Swami who Clicks

A Biographical Sketch



મટકન ભરે પાંવ,
જાના હૈ ગંગા કે ગાંવ ।

Feet so restless, they long to
reach the abode of Ganga.

Sundar Ramaiyya or Swami Sundaranand as he later became known, was born in 1926 in the coastal village of Anantapuram, taluka Muttakur, district Nellore in Andhra Pradesh. His father's name was Venkatasubbiah and his mother's name Panchamma. Sundar Ramaiyya was sent to schools in Madras, Nellore and a place near his village, but could study only upto the fourth class. Influenced and inspired right from childhood by the Bhakti plays (based on the life of great devotees) enacted in his village, he was keen to meditate like Dhruva, Prahlad and Markandeya. At the same time, like children of his age, he participated in other childhood activities and still remembers with fondness the games he used to play and the worship conducted on the seashore four kilometres away from his village.

He tried to run away from home, once when about 12 years of age and again while 15 or 16, but was caught and brought back home by his father on both occasions. On the third attempt, at the age of about 20, he succeeded, though without really knowing where he wanted to go. Thereafter, it is a tale of trials and tribulations for a number of years. Immediately after leaving home, he wandered for several months in Calcutta, Mymensingh, and then returned to Andhra and continued to roam around Vijayawada and Rajamundry. Although the memory of his mother and sisters wrenched his heart, he did not go back home.

Later, travelling on the foot-board of a train near Kashi (Varanasi), he was hit by an approaching platform. His toe-thumb was crushed and the flesh of the right knee disappeared upto the bone. "I spent three months in the civil hospital of Kashi," he recalls, "and was impressed by the services rendered by nurses. One of the nurses cared for me like my own sister and till this day I cannot repay her debt." With a bandaged leg, he limped off to Vishwanath temple and then to the banks of the Ganga where people took pity on his condition and would offer him things to eat. A Tamil sadhu from Madras noticed him sitting at one place on the banks of the Ganga for several days. The sadhu was going to Haridwar and offered to take the injured youth with him. After reaching Haridwar, for a few months Sundar Ramaiyya lived under a tree near two sadhus from the south. He used to collect wood and bring cowdung cakes for their fire. Once, when he was collecting wood from the nearby forest, the forest guard stopped him and slapped him hard. The guard

took away the firewood and the blanket that served as Sundar Ramaiyya's covering and bedsheets rolled into one. Without the blanket, he caught cold, contracted dysentery, and uncared for his body became infested with lice. Refugees from Pakistan were living alongside, half-clad and starving. "Even in their suffering they would offer some food to me," he remembers vividly. With the ghats choking with refugees, he was turned away from there by a sadhu. His condition was so bad that he had to crawl to the banks to drink water, but even in that condition he kept reciting 'Ram Ram.' With flies hovering over him, he fainted. When he regained consciousness, he found himself in the Ramakrishna hospital.

After 15-20 days, he recovered and left for Rishikesh. At the Triveni Ghat, he joined the queue of sadhus for food being distributed by the Baba Kali Kamliwale Trust. He had no vessel or bowl to accept food. Besides, he did not know how to beg for food. When his turn came, the inspector boxed him on his ear and turned him away, saying, "How have you joined the queue of sadhus? This is no place for beggars."

A householder, Dharmadutt Raturi, took pity on him and took him to Swami Dayanand Giri in Panchakuti. Sundar Ramaiyya lay down at the Swami's feet and entreated him for initiation. The Swami accepted him, and while initiating him as a *Brahmachari* (religious student who observes celibacy), he gave him the name of Sundaranand. He taught Sundaranand the rules of *Brahmacharya* and the way to strictly observe them. Sundaranand served the Swami and his visitors for two months and learnt many things, such as, how much a sadhu should eat and sleep, how to avoid unnecessary talking, and how to avoid bad company.

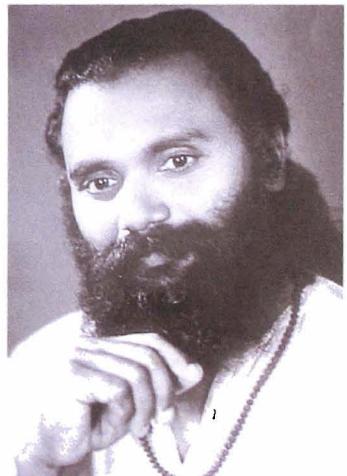
After initiation, Sundaranand started receiving alms. Listening to the discourses of ascetics and keeping their company, he learnt about the goal of life. He also learnt here about the eminent Swami Tapovanam Maharaj, his asceticism, his detachment and his extraordinary scholarship. A strong urge took hold of Sundaranand to meet this great ascetic. With the permission of Swami Dayanand Giri, he set out to look for him.

For a few months he served as a sadhu in Vasishtha cave on the Badrinath route. Once while meditating alone at night he experienced the state of *samadhi*. At the beginning of summer he left for Uttarkashi. He had with him a pair of ochre robes, a cotton sheet and a begging bowl. In those days it was his resolve not to allow any comforts to the body, gladly bear all the pain and not to talk about it to anyone. Walking on tough mountainous terrain, Sundaranand's feet got blistered. After walking for five days, he reached Uttarkashi. He was observing the vow of silence at that time, but the villagers understood his sign language and gave him alms.

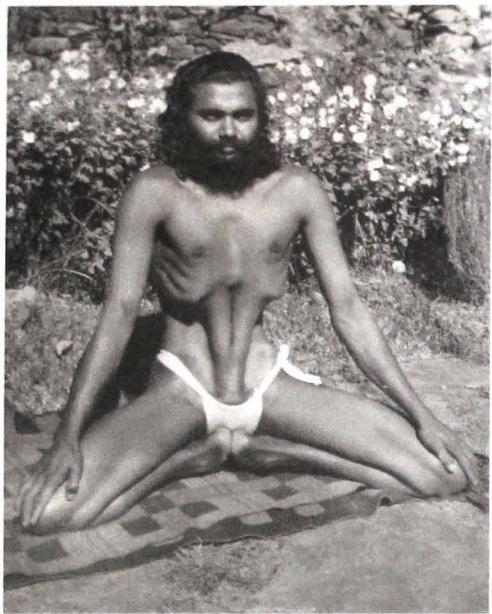
On reaching Uttarkashi he found the cottage of Swami Tapovanam Maharaj. "Clad only in a loincloth he was sitting in the verandah basking in the sun even as he looked at the Ganga and the mountains," recalls Sundaranand. "He had large eyes, was strongly built and had a majestic bearing." Sundaranand prostrated himself on the ground in obeisance and sat down below the verandah. The Swami looked at Sundaranand for sometime and then asked where he was coming from. Since Sundaranand had undertaken a vow of silence for a specific period, he wrote down 'Rishikesh' on the ground. The Swami understood and said, "You are a child. With such austerities you will never understand God. It will do you no good. You will succeed neither as a sadhu nor as a householder. Austerities will pull you down." Then the Swami became silent. Sundaranand sat there for a long time



1957



1959



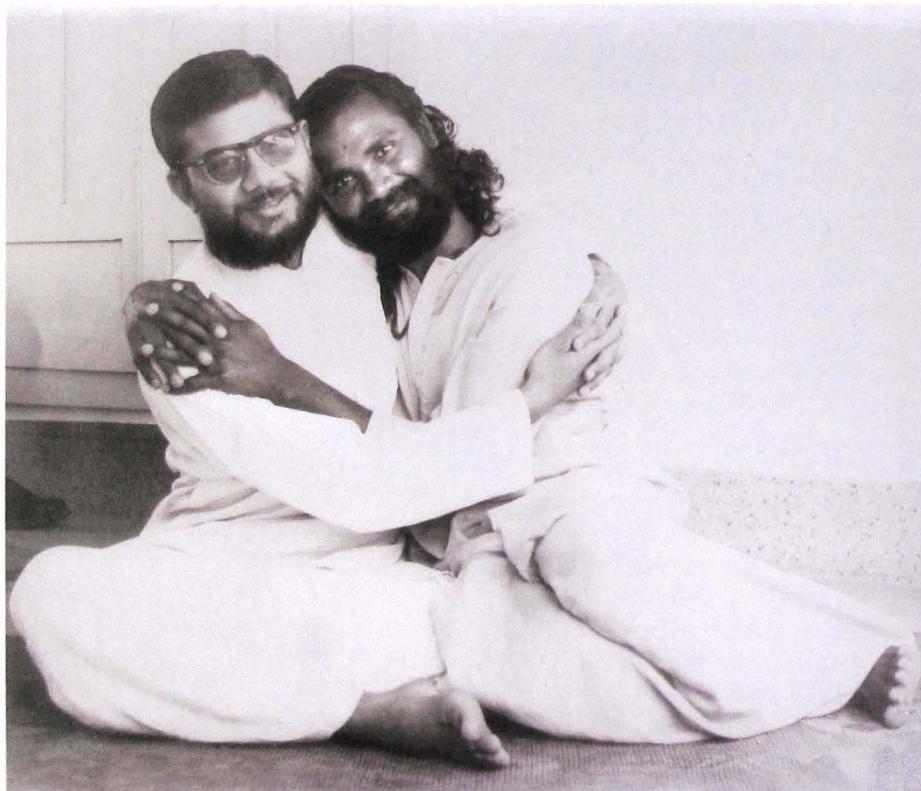
Swami Sundaranand in
Indrajit asana (pic 1956).

and then left after paying his respects to the Swami. This continued for several days but the Swami did not break his silence. Finally one day the Swami asked his name and suggested he look for a place to live in nearby Dandibari.

The days passed. One day the Swami informed Sundaranand, "Tomorrow I am going to Gangotri." He did not ask Sundaranand to join him. Next morning when Sundaranand arrived, the Swami had already gone. Sundaranand felt dejected and could not continue with his meditation. Whatever he did — seeking alms, eating or meditating, he could not keep away the thought of the Swami from his mind. Nothing interested him. He could not even speak to anybody about it. The company of other mahatmas gave him no solace. He became restless with the desire to see the Swami again. The separation became unbearable. Sleeping or waking, his face would appear before him. Two days went by, and on the third day he could not control himself and left for Gangotri.

After four days of tough barefoot walking, he reached Gangotri. First he went to Gangaji temple and made obeisance to the river Ganga. Still observing silence, he asked for directions by writing with his finger. One fine morning he found the Swami across the

Ganga enjoying the sun outside his cottage with a prominent *tripund* (three lines made of ashes symbolic of Shiva) on his forehead. He was alone and seemed to be engaged in deep contemplation. It was an old cottage made of wood and in



With his close friend
Mahamandaleshwar
Swami Raghavanand of
Guru Ram Rai Udasin
Ashram (pic 1962).

FACING PAGE BELOW:

In a prayer posture.

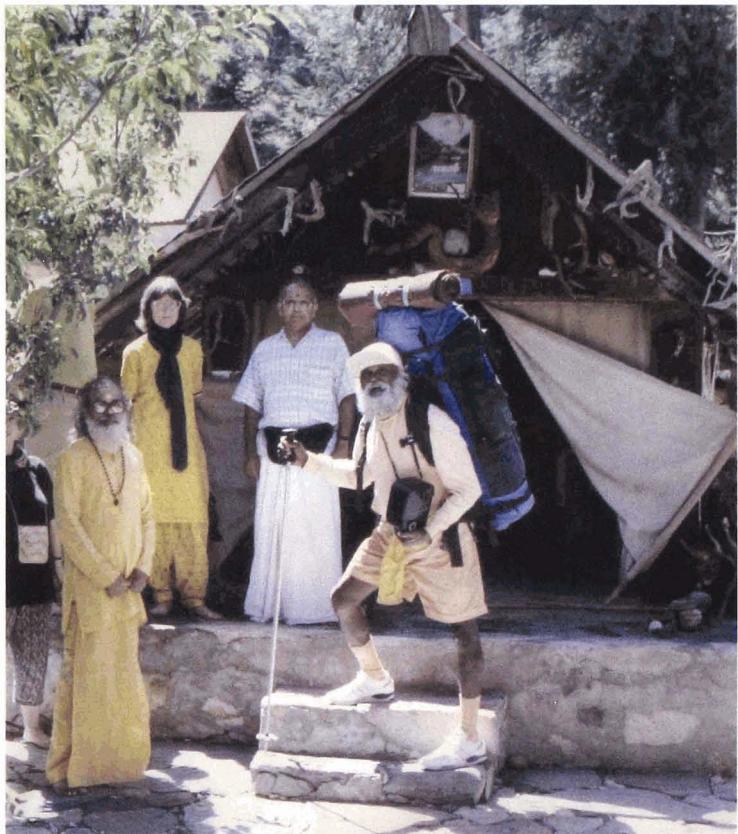
The author sitting on the path leading to his cottage which is dotted with a large number of artistically shaped objects.

front was clean-swept ground. There was a four feet high wall around the cottage separating it from the forest. Two trees grew within. Sundaranand prostrated and sat before him. The Swami opened his eyes at the sound and merely said, "Oh, you've come. Go settle down under some rock", but he looked pleased.

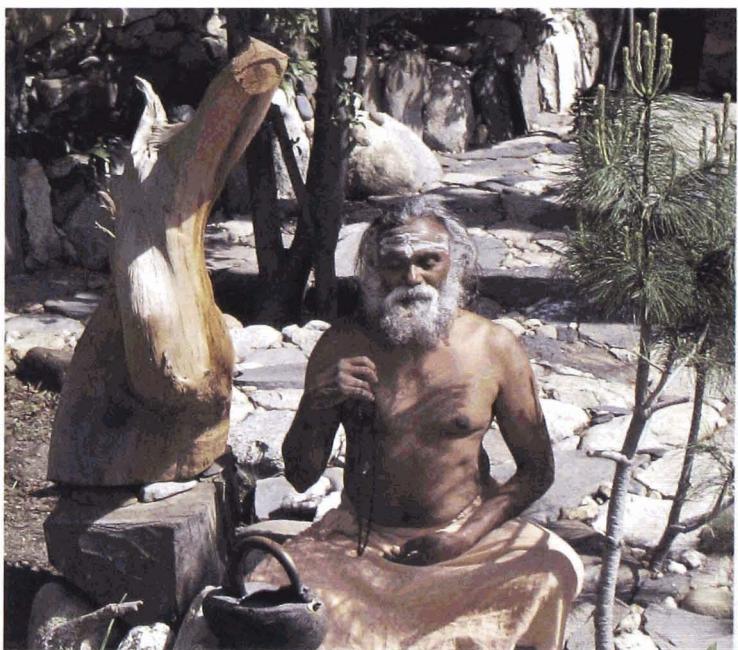
On the third day when Sundaranand went for his *darshan*, the Swami told him arrangements for his alms had been made. Sundaranand lived in a cave on the Bhagirath rock in which he could sit and sleep but could not stand. It was a difficult life sleeping on Bhoj leaves which left his back and sometimes his chest cold. The day for breaking his vow of silence was still far away. He went twice everyday for the Swami's *darshan*. From 8 to 10 in the morning, the Swami taught the Vedas to sadhus and householders.

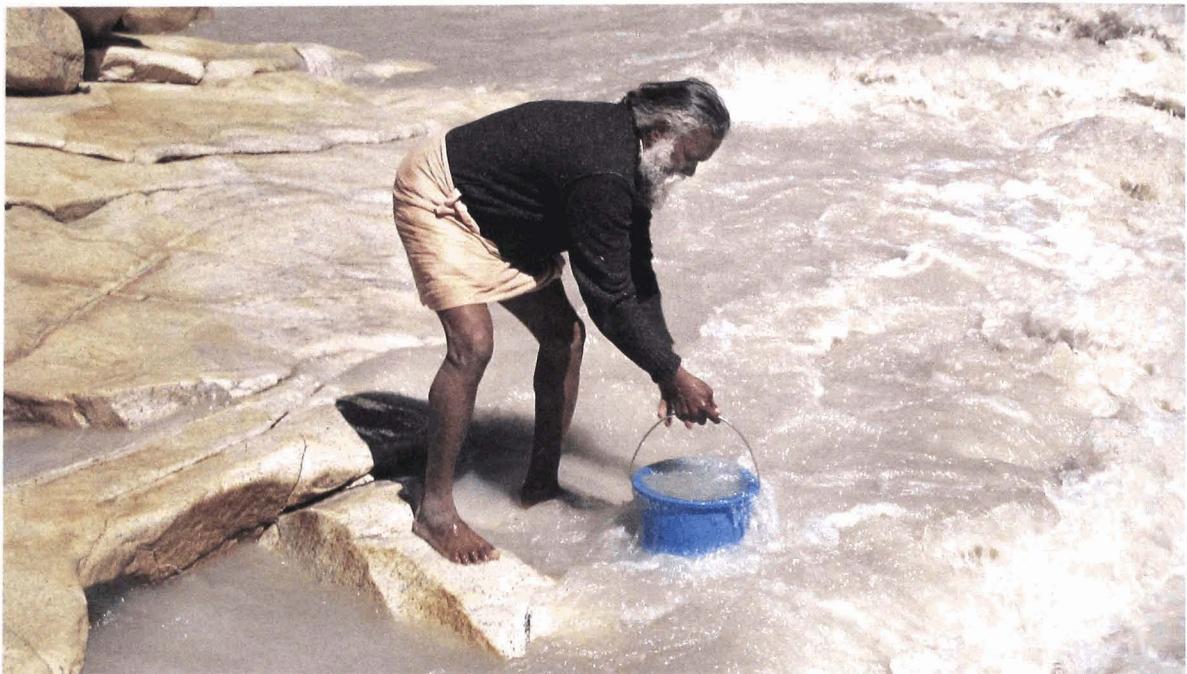
One day Sundaranand was sitting in his cave. From the holes in the piled-up stones he noticed that somebody was standing outside. On coming out he found Swami Tapovanam Maharaj standing there. Sundaranand prostrated and stood on one side. The Swami said, "That Brahmachari has gone. You come. Prepare tea for me and for yourself too." Sundaranand was waiting for just such a moment. "The Guru had found me fit for his service", says Sundaranand humbly. "I picked up my sheet and food bowl and started tailing him like a calf follows the cow." On reaching his cottage, the Swami pointed to an underground cave-like cottage, and said, "this is your dwelling. Make your seat in it." Sundaranand placed Bhoj leaves there and started living comfortably. "I found such happiness for the first time after renouncing home", Sundaranand recalls. "In fact this was even greater happiness than that of my home." So it was that Sundaranand finally settled at the feet of his Guru Swami Tapovanam Maharaj in the Gangotri region of the Himalaya in 1948.

In 1949 Swami Chinmayananda came to Swami Tapovanam Maharaj to learn



The bags are packed. The camera is loaded. Swamiji is ready to leave for a trek.





A sublime link with the Ganga –
the author at Gauri Kund, Gangotri.

जिसका कोई सुध न लिवैया
उसकी मैया गंगा मैया।

"To anybody who is uncared for
and alone, Mother Ganga offers
her lap of solace."

Vedas, Upanishadas, Brahmasutras and Gita etc. He was also given a cottage next to Tapovan cottage. At the instruction of Gurudev (the Swami), in the winter of 1950 Sundaranand stayed back in Gangotri for meditation. Guruji and others left for Uttarkashi. The cottage remained warm with the *dhuni* (fire) but the smoke blackened Sundaranand. After that he lived there for five winters continuously. Later, he began to like being alone. And the time was spent in chanting and meditation.

The Swami fell sick in Uttarkashi and, as usual, he was alone. When Sundaranand came to know of it, he straightaway left for Uttarkashi. The path was rough and involved several difficult climbs. After walking for about 100 kms, Sundaranand reached Uttarkashi at 7 in the evening. On seeing him, the Swami said, "You've come! Milk is kept there, please make some coffee."

With the encouragement of the Guru, Sundaranand started on mountain journeys. In 1955 for the first time he went from Gangotri to Badrinath. After this he travelled on this route ten times. In 1956, with the permission of Gurudev, he started photographing the Himalaya for which he travelled far and wide in the mountains, climbed towering peaks, traversed difficult valleys and treacherous glaciers.

Today, Sundaranand's cottage, his co-disciple Swami Chinmayananda's cottage and Gurudev's Tapovan cottage are still preserved as they were. "I have been living there as an humble servant of the Guru for the last 50 years," says Sundaranand, "in Gurudev's company till 1957 and thereafter alone." Before he gave up his life, Gurudev said to him, "I can never repay the debt of your services to me. There will be no dearth in your life."

After Gurudev became one with the ultimate Brahman, Sundaranand travelled throughout the country visiting pilgrim centres, temples and monasteries. He interacted with sadhus, ascetics, scholars, litterateurs, artists, politicians, editors

and journalists — a practice which continues till this day. His later travels related to introducing the Himalaya to his countrymen through slide-shows. Photo exhibitions were held in the major metropolitan centres – five times in Delhi, twice each in Nagpur, Pune, Bangalore, Calcutta and Mumbai, once each in Jaipur, Meerut, Hyderabad, Muzaffarnagar, Haridwar Kumbha Mela, Rishikesh, Dehradun, Ujjain, Mussoorie, Chandigarh etc. Lakhs of people were able to look at the Himalaya, and newspapers and magazines lavished high praise.

"I have held thousands of slide shows of the Himalaya, some lasting even three hours, accompanied by my commentary and followed by the question-answer session", reveals Sundaranand. Among the places where he has held slide shows are: Rashtrapati Bhawan, Up-Rashtrapati Bhawan, Prime Minister's residence, Central Hall of Parliament, Railway Board, Army Cantonments, Pusa Institute, World Wildlife Fund (India), India International Centre, Meteorological Office, Jehangir Art Gallery, All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society, Delhi Camera Society, Photo Art Group (Ahmedabad) and in the camera clubs of many metropolitan centres. Many politicians, administrators, engineers, doctors, famous photographers, artists, writers and intellectuals became his friends and admirers. Admirers abound even abroad — in America, Japan, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Australia, Germany, Israel, Iraq and elsewhere. His photographs have found place in foreign publications. BBC and TV channels of Germany, Japan and Italy made films on him for their audiences.

Sadly, in the name of publishing a book, an American took away a thousand slides and prints. Another NRI took away hundreds of slides and precious photographs, and never returned them. In 1984 he suffered a big loss by way of a theft masterminded by some jealous sadhus and pandas of Gangotri. They took away three cameras and lenses, thousands of slides, negatives, eight registers filled with comments by admirers who saw the shows, eight albums, mountaineering equipment and some rare books.

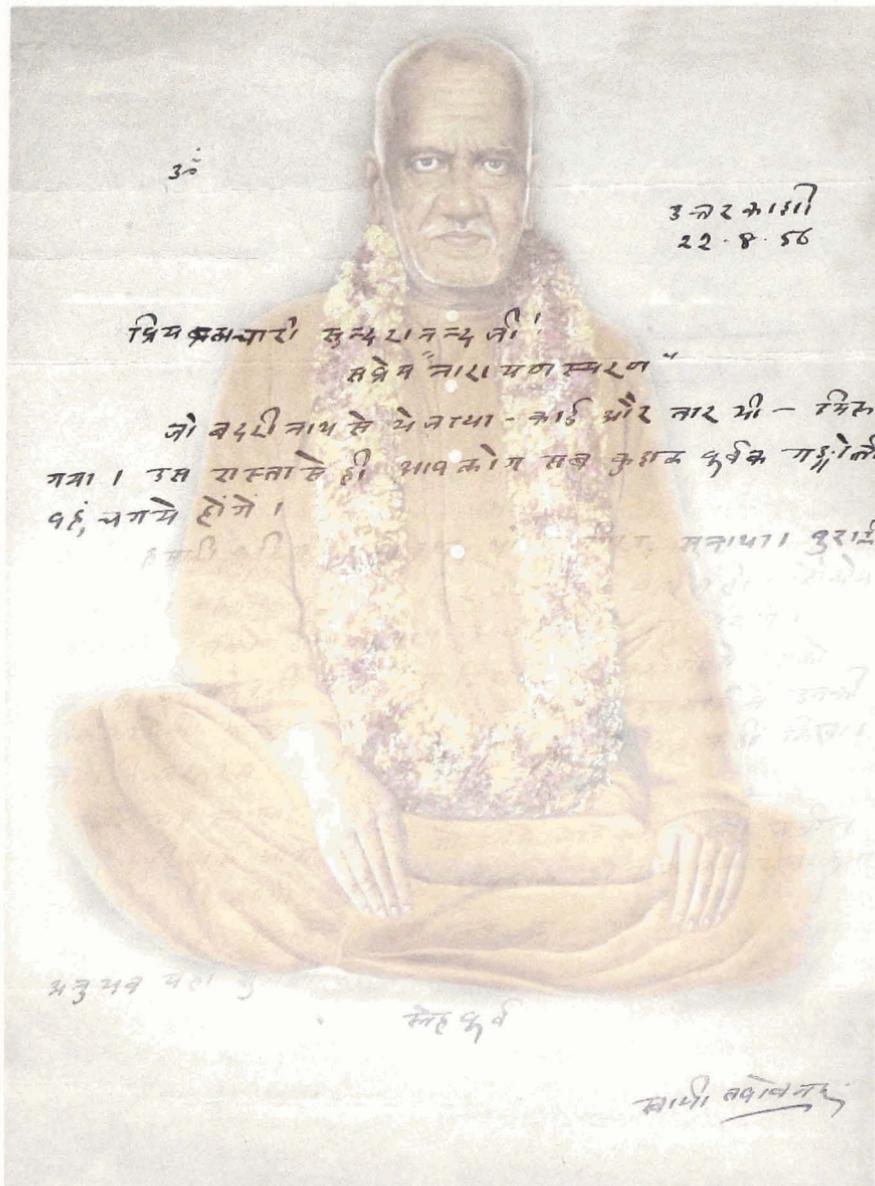
"I have no desires left to live long", says Sundaranand "and would like to give up this body like my Gurudev did. The present head of Chinmaya Mission, Swami Tejomayananda, has very graciously offered to set up a museum at Tapovan cottage in Gangotri. The book on the Himalaya is ready. God willing, I may bring out an illustrated book on my travels across rest of the country soon..."



2001

Saral Kumar
(Saral Kumar)

Blessings from Gurujiji



An eminent Sanskrit scholar writes about the author

हिमालयस्य महात्म्यं ज्ञातं येन महात्मना,
 वन्द्यः स सुन्दरानन्दो योगी योगविदावरः ।
 दर्शितं विविधं रूपं वित्रस्थं देवतात्मनः
 प्रामाण्यम् भजते सोयं हिमवद् विषये सदा ॥

Adorations to Sundaranand, a most accomplished yogi and photographer who has taken beautiful and rare pictures of great Himalaya, travelled through its ranges and as such he is an authority on Himalaya.

Glossary

<i>Adi</i>	The very first	<i>Mahatma</i>	A great soul
<i>Akhada</i>	A sect of sadhus	<i>Marusthalī</i>	Desert area
<i>Antah-salila</i>	Subterranean stream	<i>Math</i>	A monastery
<i>Artha</i>	Wealth	<i>Moksha</i>	Salvation
<i>Ashtadhatu</i>	An alloy of eight metals considered auspicious	<i>Nath</i>	A particular sect of ascetics, or one belonging to it.
<i>Baal</i>	Child	<i>Navaratra</i>	Nine auspicious days devoted to the worship of the goddess Kali
<i>Barral</i>	A swift and shy mountain goat	<i>Panch</i>	Five
<i>Bhavishya</i>	Future	<i>Panda</i>	A Brahmin ritualist
<i>Brahma Kapaliks</i>	A sect of renunciants who indulge in Tantrik rituals using human skulls	<i>Prayag</i>	Confluence of two or more rivers
<i>Brahmachari</i>	A celibate	<i>Pujari</i>	A priest
<i>Brahmin</i>	An upper caste of Hindus, that learnt and taught scriptures	<i>Punarnava</i>	A rejuvenating medicinal herb
<i>Boodha</i>	Old	<i>Puranas</i>	Ancient mythological/historical texts
<i>Charas</i>	The semi-solid juice of hemp plants; if smoked it is a more potent intoxicant than <i>sulpha/ganja</i>	<i>Raj Jat</i>	Royal journey
<i>Chausingha</i>	A deer having four horns	<i>Rajhans</i>	Mythological crane, said to feed on pearls
<i>Chatti</i>	Resting place	<i>Ringal</i>	A variety of cane
<i>Chilka</i>	A circular enclosure made by shepherds	<i>Rishi</i>	A seer
<i>Darshan</i>	To see a revered person or an idol	<i>Roti</i>	Flat, thin and round bread made from fresh dough
<i>Dev Bhumi</i>	Land of gods	<i>Rudraveena</i>	A stringed musical instrument
<i>Dhaba</i>	A make-shift roadside eatery	<i>Sadhu</i>	A renunciant clad in saffron robe
<i>Dharamshala</i>	A rest house at an economical price	<i>Salila</i>	A stream
<i>Dharma</i>	Religion or religious duty	<i>Sampradaya</i>	A sect
<i>Dhooni</i>	A fire kept burning or smouldering by sadhus for warding off cold, or for cooking	<i>Sanskriti</i>	Culture
<i>Dhyana</i>	Meditation	<i>Sanyasi</i>	A renunciant, who is supposed to be at a stage where he does not own even his body
<i>Ganja</i>	Same as <i>sulpha</i> , smoked by sadhus	<i>Saraswati</i>	Goddess of learning. Also an extinct river, whose bed is discernible at places, as well as from satellite pictures
<i>Ghats</i>	A place suitable for bathing on the bank of a river	<i>Sauanya</i>	Serene
<i>Gurudwara</i>	Place of worship for the Sikhs	<i>Sahasra</i>	A thousand
<i>Ishan</i>	Northeast direction	<i>Shahi Snan</i>	Royal communal bath by naked sadhus of Naga sect in the Ganga on the occasion of Kumbha
<i>Khadu</i>	Ram	<i>Shilajit</i>	Thick paste of natural salts and traces of noble metals oozed out of rocks, and considered a rejuvenating medicine
<i>Kalhua</i>	Dark or black complexioned	<i>Sulpha</i>	Dry leaves from the hemp plants, smoked for intoxication or relaxation
<i>Kana</i>	Dried up lake	<i>Sura Gaye</i>	Cow of gods, a term used for female yak in the scriptures
<i>Karmayogi</i>	A person who has taken a vow to do his duty without aspiring for returns or rewards	<i>Taal</i>	Lake
<i>Kharak</i>	A place close to a spring safe from winds and sleet	<i>Taandav</i>	Lord Shiva's dance of destruction
<i>Khaat</i>	Bed, a charpai,	<i>Thelu</i>	Juniper bush
<i>Kumbha</i>	Literally a pitcher, signifying festival of Kumbha, occurring every 12 years	<i>Vedic</i>	Pertaining to the Vedas
<i>Kund</i>	Small lake	<i>Vriddha</i>	Old
<i>Kutcha</i>	Non-metalled, pedestrian track	<i>Yajna</i>	Fire ritual accompanied by chanting of hymns
<i>Maha-mandaleshwara</i>	Chief of a sect of sadhus		

Index



A

Alaknanda 12, 28, 130, 183, 185, 202, 205, 210, 212, 213, 217, 222
Archa 85
Arva glacier 129
Asi 35
Atees 85
Auli 202
Awana 45, 130
Ayurvedic 58

B

Baanj 171
Badrinath xiv, 12, 15, 19, 28, 129, 166, 177, 202, 204, 205, 206, 210, 212, 213, 217, 220, 222, 227, 259, 263, 268, 287, 290
Badrinath Chaukhamba 220
Baguvasa 224
Bandarpoochch 8, 33
Bangla 93, 267
Banglavasa 93
Bara Haat 34
Barral 42
Beas 249
Bedani 223, 224
Bhagirath rocks 257
Bhagirathi 12, 28, 30
Bhairav 180
Bhairon 48, 54, 66, 258, 259
Bhairon Jhamp 66
Bhaktapur 240
Bharat-kunna 112, 130, 180
Bhaskar Prayag 166
Bhavishya Badri 204
Bhilangana 30, 130, 169
Bhim Gattu 46
Bhim Setu 213, 217
Bhim Shila 212
Bhim Taal 228
Bhoj 11, 47, 84, 93, 97, 99, 107, 123, 210, 217, 267, 289
Bhoj Kharak 84
Bhrigu 67, 100, 104, 112, 130
Bhrigupanth 48, 54, 67, 85, 93, 130
Boodha Kedar 169, 259
Brahma Gufa 180
Brahma Kamal 85
Brahma Kapaliks 239
Brahma Taal 169
Brahmin 182, 213
Burans 32, 35, 228, 231

C

Chambal 14
Chandra Kund 220, 221
Chandra Shila 182, 183
Chandra Taal 249
Chandrabhaga 228, 251
Chandravadini 28, 30

Chaturangi range 112
Chaukhamba 130, 220
Chauravari 177, 180
Cheedvaya 54, 93, 97, 104, 105, 109, 112, 130, 267
Chenab 251

D

Daksha Prajapati 19, 22
Dayara 166
Deodar 11, 249, 259
Dev Marg 129, 130
Dev Prayag 12, 27, 222
Dharali 44, 45, 47, 259, 263
Dokrani 45, 259
Draupadi 12, 30, 45, 174, 217, 220
Draupadi Danda 45

E

Earthquake 42, 44, 47, 112
Everest 238, 239, 243, 244

F

Fain Kamal 85

G

Ganesha 67, 85, 212, 224
Gangnani 37, 42
Gangotri xiv, 10, 12, 14, 15, 19, 33, 37, 44, 46, 47, 54, 56, 58, 64, 66, 67, 84, 93, 99, 102, 104, 105, 109, 123, 126, 128, 130, 169, 177, 180, 183, 202, 244, 252, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259, 267, 288, 289, 290, 291
Gauri Kund 58, 61, 169, 172
Ghastoli 129
Gomukh 14, 61, 93, 97, 101, 102, 104, 105, 109, 112, 123, 126, 128, 129, 130, 202, 216, 257, 259, 267
Gopeshwar 183, 185
Gorakhnath 240
Gum-gum 47

H

Hanuman Chatti 32, 34, 207
Hanuman Tekri 85
Har-ki-Doon 8, 259, 294
Har-ki-Pauri 5, 15, 22
Haridwar 19, 22, 24, 99, 258, 286, 291
Harsil 42, 44, 259
Hathi 202
Helang 185
Hemkund 12, 66, 205
Hom Kund 226
Hot water spring 33, 37, 169, 202, 236, 245, 247, 249

I

Indrani 35

J

Jahnavi 9, 14, 48
Jahnu 9, 14
Jalandhari 44
Jangla 47, 48
Jodav 171
Jogin 56, 67, 84, 85, 130
Joshimath 202, 204, 205, 259

K

Kabru 243
Kail 11, 259
Kailash-Mansarovar 48, 66, 204, 222, 225, 230, 233, 240, 244
Kaivalya Dham 220
Kak Bhushundi 206
Kali 28, 97, 99, 107, 180, 233, 287
Kali Kamiwale Trust 97, 99, 107, 287
Kali Math 180
Kalidas 218
Kalindi 129, 130, 177, 202
Kalpa Kedar 44, 45, 185, 202
Kalua Vinayak 224
Kannauj 224
Kapaliks 239
Kaphkot 230
Kartikeya Swami 185
Kathmandu 239, 240
Kaurai 85
Kaveri 14
Kedar Doom 112, 130
Kedar Ganga 9, 64, 66, 85, 258, 259
Kedar Khand 19, 47, 171
Kedar Taal 67, 84, 85
Kedar valley 1, 66, 67, 166, 177, 180, 184, 259, 263
Kedarnath xiv, 12, 15, 19, 35, 67, 172, 174, 177, 180, 182, 212, 268
Keshav Prayag 217
Kharchkund 112, 130
Khatling 67, 169, 177
Kirti glacier 112
Kirti-stambha 112, 180
Kotdwara 227
Koteswar 112, 128, 130, 183, 185
Krishna 14, 206
Kuber 202, 207, 212
Kuber Bhandar 212
Kullu 245, 249, 251, 259
Kum-kum 47
Kumbha 22, 289, 291
Kupang 48
Kush Kalyan 37, 171, 259

L

Ladakh 66, 245, 247, 249, 251
Lahaul 245, 249, 251
Lakshman Ganga 206
Lansdowne 227
Linga Taal 169

M

Madhya Maheshwar 182
Mahadev 27, 35, 183, 185, 206
Maharishi xiv, 212

Makwa 46, 259
Mala-Awana 259
Malla 37, 166, 169, 171
Mana 112, 130, 202, 212, 217, 218, 221
Manda 97, 130
Mandakini 12, 130, 169, 172, 174, 177, 180
Mandal 54, 185
Manikaran 249
Marriage of trees 254
Matri 54, 112, 130
Meru 112, 124, 128
Munal 126
Musa Pani 129
Musk deer 9, 10, 42, 47, 64, 85, 183, 205

N

Nainchi Paat 105
Nandadevi 2, 12, 205, 222, 223, 224, 225, 227, 228, 230, 233, 259
Nandadevi Raj Jat 2, 222, 223, 224, 226, 227
Nandakhat 230, 232, 233
Nandini 225, 227
Nara 212
Narayana xvi, 24, 169, 171, 202, 204, 212, 213, 233
Narayana Taal 169
Narmada 14
Nath Sampradaya 240
Nauti 222
Neelam 230, 259
Neelang 50, 259
Neelkanth 27, 220, 242

P

Padmaksh 50
Pakauri Nala 105
Pandav Sera 45, 171
Pandavas xiv, 12, 30, 56, 58, 174, 206, 217, 218
Param 9
Pari Taal 169
Parvati xvi, 19, 130, 169, 223, 226, 228, 249
Patangana 56, 58
Peepal Koti 202
Pilku 130, 166, 169
Pindari 205, 230, 231, 232
Prahladpur 240
Prayag 28, 222
Prey 100, 243
Punjab Sindh Anna Kshetra 107
Puranas xiv, 8, 12, 19, 45, 46, 56, 58, 64, 104
Pushpavasa 101

R

Rai-muraind 11, 259, 267
Raktakunna 221
Raktavarna 104, 126, 128, 130, 262
Ramneek Dweep 45
Ranikhet 228, 233, 254
Ransi Daur 218
Ringal 177, 223
Rishi Ganga 212
Rohtang Pass 243, 249
Rohthang glacier 243
Roopkund 12, 224, 225, 236

Rudra Ganga 56, 67, 259
Rudranath 185

S

Sadhu Gufa 231, 232
Sahasratala 37, 169, 171, 177
Sanskrit 218
Saraswati 8, 212, 217, 221
Satopanth 130, 217, 218, 220
Sau-kunni 218
Saumya Varanasi 34
Shatling 169
Shilajit 54
Shiva Puran 171
Shivlinga 44, 112, 124, 130, 185, 246, 247
Shri Kailash 112, 130
Shrikanth 45, 47, 263
Shwetvarna 112
Shyam 42
Snow bears 42, 112
Snow deer 9, 47, 54, 85, 100
Snowslides 85, 112
Sone 169
Spiti 245, 249, 251
Srinagar 227, 245, 247, 255, 259
Sudarshan 54, 112, 130
Sukhi Top 42
Suralaya 130
Surya Kund 58, 220
Swargarohan 217, 220

T

Taandav 182
Tapovan 104, 112, 123, 124, 126, 183, 244, 262, 267, 289, 290, 291
Tawaghat 233
Tethys 4
Thalaisagar 67, 85, 130
Trishul 226
Triyugi Narayana 169
Tunganath 182, 183
Tutrail 100

U

Uddhav 207
Urvashi 212
Uttarkashi 34, 35, 37, 66, 166, 183, 252, 258, 259, 267, 287, 290

V

Vaishnavas 22
Van-kakri 183
Vasishta 112, 130, 287
Vasudev 206
Vasuki 129, 130, 169, 177, 262
Vasuki lake 169, 262
Veernagar 239
Venu 54, 267

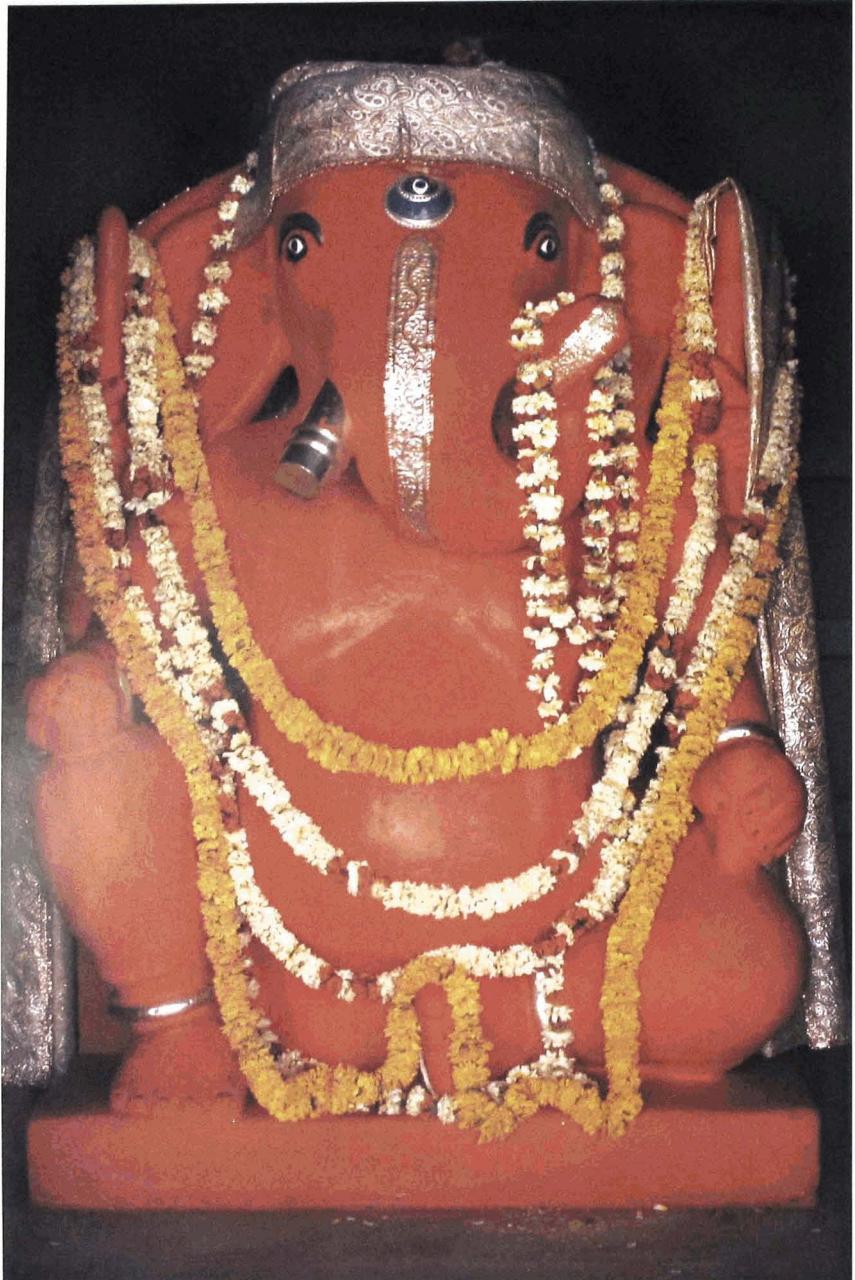
Y

Yaksha 218
Yamraj 14, 221

Z

Zozila 251

Ganadhipataye Namah



*In the end I once again prostrate myself at the feet of Lord Ganesha
with whose grace this project could be completed.*

सत्यम् शिवम् सुन्दरम् ।
ओम नमः इति देवतात्मा नगाधिराज ॥

